2008-4-20 Land
Rev. Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
born of the earth and many generations
to worship, to open ourselves to wholeness,
to remember that the land we cross, day by day,
the land we sheathe in concrete and tar and war,
***is our source, our end, our past and our future*,**
a mystery no less than ourselves,
a great summons to thanks and praise. So,

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

When set against the cold of space,
the earth is warm, the earth is warm.
When set against my sun-lit skin,
the earth is cool, the earth is cool.
When turned in spring, with shovel and hoe,
the earth glows black, the earth glows black.
When planted with seed, and watered by rain,
the earth grows green, the earth grows green.
When shaking or flooding or drying or cracking,
the earth bends will, the earth bends will.
When embracing the death of those we love,
the earth grows blest, the earth grows blest.
When singing turns silent and ringing tapers,
the earth is still, the earth, too, is still.

Silence

When silence can open the doors of our hearts,
the earth is full, the earth is full.
When loving and mem'ry and longing arrive,
the earth is one, the earth is one.
When seeing the faces and saying the names,
the earth is gift, the earth is gift.
Naming

When singing and rhythm and saying are one,
the earth is us, the earth is us.

Readings:

The First Reading *is a poem by Anna Akhmatova, an exemplary Russian poet of Ukrainian birth who survived Stalin's glare, fickle critics and a complex, insecure life. She wrote these words when she was living at her writing cottage near Vyborg, a part of Russia called Karelia where they speak more Finnish than Russian. She died there only a few years after writing this poem, called Native Land.*
She uses the feminine pronoun for earth, even though Russian, like English, has a neuter option.

We don't wear her on our breast
in cherished amulets.
We don't, with wrenching sobs,
write love poems about her.
She does not disturb our bitter sleep,
nor seem to us the final picture of paradise.
We romanticize her, in our souls, refusing to think her a mere commodity to be bought or sold. The suffering and the sick wander over her
as we do, but even we don't notice her.
Yes, for us, she's merely mud on galoshes,
and the grit blown onto our teeth.
And we grind underfoot, and we knead,
and we crumble her, this clean dust.
But eventually we lie in her and we become her,
And because of that we freely call her – ours.

1961
Leningrad. The hospital in the harbor.

The Second Reading *is in two sections, each of them short: Reading (a), from the Scroll of Shemoth, or Exodus, in the Torah, which talks about Moses' feelings as an immigrant. And Reading (b), a text unique to the Gospel of Mark which the scholars of the Jesus Seminar consider to be a rather close estimate of what Jesus said one fine day.*

First, from Shemoth, using the Hebrew names:

So Moshe consented to settle down with the family, taking to wife Yitro's daugher, who was named Tziporah. She bore a son, whom Moshe named Stranger (Gershom) for he reasoned, "Am I not a stranger in a strange land?"

And from the Gospel of Mark:

Suppose a farmer sows seed into the earth;
and then, afterward, sleeps and rises, sleeps and rises, day after day. During these days, the grain sprouts and matures, even though the sower is unaware of it. For the earth itself produces fruit *on its own*, first a shoot, and then a stalk and then the mature grain clustered on the stalk. And when the grain is ripe, the farmer calls for a sickle. Why? Because it's harvest time!

Sermon

Today is a day in the week of Passover/Pesach. Today is a day in Spring, the planting season. Today is the Sunday nearest to Earth Day. Today, like every day, is a summons to memory and hope, a commission to always go deeper.

And for me, all of these things are connected by the word "Land." And this formative story:

When I was in college, I took Russian for a couple of years, since my school required familiarity with two languages to graduate.

Helen Kovach was my Russian teacher. She was as amazing a teacher as I was an exasperating student. She clearly loved her work and loved us, even though she was invariably tough on us. Most of us called her Mama Kovach. To her face, no less. She invited her students over to her house at the end of each quarter for a *vyecherinka*, a night party, for which she cooked ten gallons of *borshch* at least.

It was during one of these parties that I met Helen's mother, Julia Gersdorff, who was somewhere in her early eighties then. One summer, Helen wanted to go to Europe for the whole summer, a mini-sabbatical, so she asked me if I would stay with her mother. I didn't have to do anything for her in particular…she was quite independent…but I was simply to be a presence in the house. I agreed, and lived in that house in Pontiac, Michigan, for four full months.

During that time, Julia painstakingly taught me how to cook Russian and Ukrainian food. "Fold them this way…you see?" she would say with her unusual accent, which sounded more German and French than Russian or Ukrainian.

One July day, when it was too hot to go outside, I remained inside the cool house. I was sitting on the floor. Julia…whom I called *båbushka*, or grandma, at her request…was hemming a cotton house-dress by hand. She focused on her hands as her arthritic, thimbled fingers slowly but surely moved along the edge of the green cloth. The afternoon sun laid a diamond of light on the wall behind her, and lit her up from behind. I asked her, "Båbushka, did you see some of the events of the Russian Revolution of 1917? Can you remember any stories from that time?"

And so it started. She smiled, continued to look at her hands, and then for the next three hours, she told me the story of her life, the great sail of sunlight moving slowly up the wall behind her. Sometimes she would lapse into German and I would have to remind her I couldn't understand German. And so she continued in English, with a smattering of French. I remember it all, as if it was yesterday. This is the story she told me.

"I was born on a large estate farm in rural Russia. Not long after I was born, Tchaikovski himself came and composed for a month somewhere on our land. When I grew up, I married a man named Gersdorff, and he eventually was appointed the vice-governor of Ukraine. We lived in Kiev, but spent a lot of time at our large farm estate outside of the city. Many *muzhik*…peasants… lived on, and tilled, that black and beautiful land. The earth was so rich there in Ukraine! So rich! I traveled away from the estate only a few times, once to St. Petersburg with my husband. There, I briefly met Tsar Nikolas and Tsarina Alexandra, and I think I caught sight of that scoundrel Rasputin that day. But I am not sure. It was long ago.

The war came, and the troops marched across our land to meet the German troops before they got to us. My husband served as an officer, and was gone for over two years. One day, my servants told me that all the *muzhik* had gathered on the porch of my house. They wanted to speak with me. They showed me a fancy document confirming that the land now belonged to them, not to my husband and me. It was signed Vladimir Ulyanov, which was Lenin's real name. They were very nice about it, mind you. They said to me: "You stay in the house. We will share our food with you." I said: "You are very kind. And after all, it really *is* fair that you should have land of your own anyway."

But not long afterward, despairing soldiers started to return from the front, trekking across the melting snow. The vodka factories which had been closed by the Tsar were broken into by muddy, weary, angry soldiers as they made their way back north. Some of them, drunk and mad, pillaged and set local houses and farms aflame.

One day soon after, the *muzhik* came loudly knocking at my door. They said to me, "Look, madame, flames! You must get out, you must leave and save your life."

So I packed what I could, including my favorite icon, and I had a member of my household take the sleigh over the melting snow into the town. I remember looking back and seeing smoke over my house. I knew my husband was in the White army, but I didn't know how to contact him. I made my way down to Odessa. I stayed there a while, until my husband found out where I was and joined me. We climbed aboard a ship with what little we had left. We didn't even know where it was going. It sailed out of the Black Sea through the Bosporus, and it finally let us all out, ragged and worn, at Salonika. From there we made our way to what they now call Yugoslavia, and there we settled, since the Serbian language is so much like Ukrainian, and it felt more comfortable to us to live with Cyrillic letters all around us. Helen was born there in Yugoslavia, and went to school there. When she grew up another war was already brewing, and soon started. It was a terrible time to be in Europe. But by the time the war ended, Helen fell for a man from Budapest, and married him, moving up there to be with him. I stayed where I had lived so much of my life.

Eventually, just when she was pregnant, he was taken off to Siberia for his anti-Stalinist agitation. Before they dragged him off, he insisted that she divorce him so *she* was not branded by his reputation. This she did, throwing the ring he had given her into the nearest sewer. George was born in a refugee camp some months later. Eventually, Helen had to crawl across a wheat field into West Germany, her hand held over George's mouth, after both of them had been smuggled near to the border in a coffin. From there she made her way to Canada, and she sent for me, my husband having died, to come there and live with her, and I went. She had been a law student in Budapest, you know, but you can't practice Hungarian law in Canada. So she was a housecleaner for a time and then she studied social work, and finally she made her way to Detroit. There, someone from the newly founded Oakland University approached her and asked if she would be willing to teach Russian there. She didn't want to at first, but she gave in, and she has been happy teaching there every since. And I have lived with her here in this house in Pontiac all this time."

It took a full three hours for her to tell this story. It was packed with more detail than I have offered you here, or than I can remember. But I probably don't have to tell you that I was simply stunned by her story. It was like Dr. Zhivago telling his own story, or interviewing Dostoyevski on a summer's day. I said to her, "Båbushka! Your life has been amazing! It's like a famous Russian novel yet to be written. So many people and places! So much courage, and so many split-second decisions in your life!"

For the first time in three hours, she looked up from her sewing. She looked me in the eye and said, "Yes, I have lived an amazing life. I don't know if I was courageous or foolish, but you are right when you say that my life was full of many people and places, full of what you young people call 'adventures.' But you know what? I would give up every single one of them, and the rest of my life, if I could, for but one more minute, hold a handful of the black earth of my native land. I love this land. But it is not my land, and its soil is not my soil, and its air is scented with gasoline, not lilacs. I would give everything up if I could just grab a handful of the land which produced me, and hold it up to my nose and smell its perfume."

I have to admit I was so moved by her last remark I had to leave the room. I excused myself and brewed some tea for her, served the way Russians like it, with a spoonful of cherry jam at the bottom of the glass. We never spoke of her life again, at least with that panoramic vantage.

But all at once I understood why Moshe thought of himself as a stranger in a strange land…my båbushka was named Julia, not Gershom, but still she too was a stranger in a strange land, a stranger who wanted more than anything to hold the dark dirt of her homeland in her trembling hand. Moshe must have imagined holding the rich black soil of the Nile floodplain in his hand when he named his son. That was where he was born. That was his homeland. Not Canaan up north, where he was supposedly headed…but Egypt.

Both of them ached for their former land. But listen! My båbushka's ache and Moshe's ache were personal aches. They were not political. They were not philosophical. They were not religious. Neither of them acted like they were feeling entitled to their former land. Neither of them returned to their former land. They both just ached, and felt their terrible strangeness in a strange land. They felt the pull of their unanswerable longing. They wanted to touch the earth which gave them birth. Which nurtured them. Which sustained them as they grew.

It's what the earth is for, Jesus observed. Of itself, he said, *of itself*, the earth's nature is to nourish and grow what's planted in it. The farmer sleeps and rises, sleeps and rises and has nothing to do with the growth of the grain. The farmer is not out there jumping around leading cheers for the shoots. The farmer sleeps as the seed nourished by the earth germinates *of itself.* This is a wise observation, I think. Our Iraqi children's story this AM makes another wise observation, doesn't it? It insists that the land is the only real treasure worth celebrating. Boxes of gold and emeralds? Mere folderol.

The early Hebrews made the connection between the land and the person even clearer, at least to those who aren't swaggering fundamentalists on the one side, or the "cultured despisers of religion" on the other. The famous Genesis story tells of an ***adam***…which is not a name, but only Hebrew for "an earth creature" …made from the ***adamah***, the earth, the land itself. Eventually this neuter creature, com-pletely contiguous with the soil underfoot, will be split into an ***ish***, a man, and an ***ishah***, a woman. But at the beginning, it's called only "an earth creature." This story is using the language of legend to say what we would say now with a more scientific vocabulary: our bodies are made of the same elements that make up the soil under the foundation of this building and outside in its gardens. We are made of the very same elements of the land, which, of its nature, nurtures and help things to grow. When we lose our connection to the land…by turning farming over to agribusiness, or by being kept from it by unjust laws, politics, frantic deadlines, competition, wars, prejudice or ethnic rivalries, we might lose some of our own earthly power to nurture and to help things to grow.

Many leaders in the U.S. government knew the nurturing power of the land very well. It's the only reason I can think of why they "reserved" relatively harsh parcels of land for the Native American populations, which they were trying to erase from both history *and their conscience*.

Similar attitudes distorted the GI Bill after World War II. Although black servicemen and women qualified to get loans to purchase land that would nurture them and sustain them at the edges of the great cities, the practices of those suburbs…overt racial discrimination and the point system…made such loans totally futile. This confined black populations to inner city land already owned… mostly by folks in the suburbs. If you keep people from access to land which might nurture them, you can, little by little, begin to demoralize them and sap their hope.

But this week's Passover story reminds us that land without freedom of access doesn't make any sense. Moshe didn't go home to Egypt, because the King still thought he had the right to live on other people's backs. My båbushka didn't go home to Ukraine, because Stalin was still being cruel. And the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova never went home either. She died up in Karelia, far from the black soil of her Ukrainian birth. She grieves in her poem *Native Land* about how most of us have learned to live blissfully unaware of our ties to the land. It's just "mud on our galoshes, and grit on our teeth." The only real connection, she writes, between us and the earth, is that we'll be buried in it, or scattered over it one day. Otherwise, it doesn't affect us much. We don't even notice it, she laments.

Yet later, just before she died, she changed her lament to celebration. She wrote something that actually sounds like a love poem to the land, something she had insisted couldn't be written. She writes of land not her own, but still lovable. *Land not mine, yet I'll remember how I've loved it all my days. There's the sea…the water's chilly! The rosy pines seem all ablaze! Chalk like sand still frames the ocean; air, like wine exhilarates; and the boughs at this late hour seem bare, as day's sweet light abates. As the sun now plumbs the heavens, I no longer comprehend whether the day ends, or this world,*

or the Mystery of Mysteries indwells again.

The Mystery of all Mysteries? Simply, the hard to put into words notion *that we are all equally of the earth, all equally made of its elements, and thus, all equally due access to it and its nurturing power.* And that, despite that intrinsic equality, the present world is nothing but a knot of warfare and corruption, based on the idea that the land belongs to some, not the many. Politics, religion and panicked greed deny that the earth is a source of personal nourishment and growth. Politics, religion and panicked greed work to transform land, the world over, into parcels of terror, and territories of corruption. In those parcels of terror, people are stripped of their inherent worth as "earth- creatures"…and become instead *those* Indians, *those* Jews, *those* Palestinians, *those* Arabs, *those* Catholics, those Protestants, those Muslims, those Easterners, those Westerners, those Southerners, those Yankees, those bumpkins, kooks, Californians, Christians and queers. In other words, *those* people are people without any inherent worth, according to your politics or religion of choice, or according to your own greed. *Those* people really aren't, well, people, just nuisances or even beasts to keep safely out of the clubhouse forever.

My point this morning is that our connection to the land, despite all the wonderful actions any Earth Day worth its salt would demand of us, is always first and foremost personal, not political. My point is that our power can only be moral when we know it comes to us, not by entitlement from above, but from the land below our feet. My båbushka was not being political---white, red, or even today's green--- when she held up that handful of soil. She wasn't being Russian Orthodox. She was being entirely personal. Spiritual, if you will. And she, like Akhmatova, despite her longing for her homeland, learned to find enough love for the land she settled on, even though it was not her own, to live a powerful and productive and story-telling life. For I am convinced she knew that ultimately, every bit of land on earth, no matter where it is, can be a holy land. And she knew that every single one of us, like her, comes, like the green grass of spring, from that same holy source. And there is beauty, and a sense of both first, and final home, in any land we tend, walk, garden, notice, or even hold, black and rich, in our hand.

Offering
For the continued support of this congregation's work and welcome, we set aside time for the steady fidelity of the offering, so that our dreams might have shelter, our programs, vitality, our vision, embodied.

Land Litany
Handful of earth. Handful of power.
Rise up, shoot! Open, bud. Iris open, flower!
Handful of earth. Handful of power.
Dark the pathways. Worm and rabbit.
Fishnet of roots.
Handful of earth. Handful of power.
Dust of ages. Fruit of decay.
Mystery of death and life.
Handful of earth. Handful of power.
For the joy of standing on earth instead
of nothing at all,
for the gift of holding a handful of earth, a handful of power… .v 4

(sung) **for all that is our life, we come with praise and thanks, for all life is a gift, which we are bound to use, to build the common good, and make our own days glad.**