



Stand for the Land

Plant your feet firmly on the ground. Let's get closer. Wherever you are—in a car, in your dining room, underground in the subway, in an apartment on the tenth floor—imaginatively bring your feet all the way to the ground, to the *land*. Feel the land through the built environment, through your shoes and socks, on the soles of your feet. Allow that land to greet you, not as a simple patch of dirt, but with all the life and meaning it contains.

What gifts does it bear? What anxieties does it carry? Who “owns” it? How does it resist being owned? What human, animal and plant life has this land supported over millennia? What is your relationship to this land?

With important exceptions, in particular among Indigenous peoples, these kinds of questions are not natural for most of us in Canada. In today's milieu of distraction and commodification, it is easy to feel removed from the land. Land is something that is bought and sold, part of the equations of supply and demand. The land was here long before money and markets, and it carries the deep histories of rocks and plants, animals and human communities. But in our global economy, land is only as good as what can be done on it or to it.

“Indigenous peoples often speak of belonging to the land. We say that the land owns us,” writes Anishnaabe author Patty Krawec¹. ***“Land is our first relationship, and it is the first relationship that we need to restore. We are used to standing on it, planting in it and marveling at it, but our relationship with it is complicated and colonial².”***

Christianity's role in colonialism has not only alienated settler Christians from the land and Indigenous peoples (Christian and non-Christian) who live in dialogue with it but also covered over what the Christian tradition itself has to say about land. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says that “land is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith³.” He adds that “the Bible promises precisely what the modern world denies,” a sense of land as a space of both safe, physical earth and deep, symbolic meaning⁴.

Land is everywhere in the Bible, presented as a gift that comes with a call to be responsible. Though many of us remember God's commission to the first human beings to have “dominion” over the land, God tells the Israelites, his chosen people, that the land will also “vomit them out” if they mistreat it (Lev. 18:28). We may think dominion means the land is at our disposal, but in fact the land might dispose of us if we fail to care for it. In an age of climate change, we are seeing this biblical warning come to fruition. Land in the Bible also carries a responsibility for the poor and the alien, producing and distributing the fruits of the earth for the good of all (Lev. 23:22). People and place are tied together in God's dream of a just relationship with creation.

¹ Patty Krawec, *Becoming Kin* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 142.

² Ibid, 126.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 3.

⁴ Ibid, 2.

Our global economic arrangement today is exactly the opposite of this biblical vision. In the Global South, land remains concentrated in the hands of family dynasties and large corporations. According to a recent United Nations report, “more than 70% of the world’s agricultural land is controlled by just 1% of farms, primarily large agribusiness concerns.” Extractive industries continue to push people off their land or pollute it, damaging the communities that depend on it. Here in Canada, the Coastal GasLink pipeline is presently destroying the territory of the Wet’suwet’en people; development in Ontario is trying to violate and encroach on Six Nations land; and land claims languish in courts across the country, to name only a few examples.

Land is essential to human life. It is the key to food sovereignty, biodiversity and human dignity. In his messages to popular movements, Pope Francis has continued to highlight land, work and housing as the main, interconnected social issues of our time. In a world that reduces land to raw material, we must rediscover a spirituality of the land, one that appreciates the gifts of the land and comes alongside those who are defending it from abuse.

That is why this year, Development and Peace – Caritas Canada is highlighting our partners engaged in land defence. All around the world, people are standing up for the gift of the land, a choice that often results in displacement, defamation and even death. As a Catholic solidarity movement, walking on the path of decolonization, let us learn from our partners in the Global South and connect their struggles to the struggles for the land nearer to us, making these struggles our own. As we do so, we will discover not only the abundant gift of the land, but also the core of our faith, where land is central, good and available for all.

“We need to restore our relationship with the land around us,” writes Krawec. “That means going outside, as my son is prone to remind me. It means noticing and listening”⁶.

Let us listen together this Lent. We can start with the land beneath us. After all this reading, return to the land beneath your feet that greeted you at the beginning.

What do you notice?

What do you hear?

What do you feel?



⁵ United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, *The Global Land Outlook*, 2nd edition (Bonn: UNCCD, 2022), 6. Available online: https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2022-04/UNCCD_GLO2_low-res_2.pdf.

⁶ Krawec, *Becoming Kin*, 126