

The North American Continent

By Thomas Berry

In these opening years of the 21st century as we gather here in this great central valley of the North American continent, we reflect, in a moment of quiet, on our dwelling place here on this continent.

When we came to this continent, it was a glorious land of woodlands and prairie grasses, of a vast open sky, a land of buffalo and elk, a land of abundance shaped through the centuries with their summer storms and winter chill.

Today we come to this valley from the coastal plains, the Atlantic shores, the Northeastern woodlands, the Appalachian hill country, from the Great Lakes to the north, the Gulf regions to the south, from the grasslands, the mountains and the deserts to the west, the redwood forests along the Pacific shores, from the rainforests in the shadow of Mount Rainier, from the far North where the boreal woodlands sweep down from Alaska across central Canada, to the storm-beaten cliffs of the North Atlantic.

We come here today, to this valley, as on a pilgrimage,
from all these regions and from regions beyond.

We come to reflect on how, centuries ago, we might have joined the community of life here,

we might have established an intimacy with this continent in all its manifestations.

We might have seen this land as a divinely blessed land to be revered and dwelt in as a light and gracious presence.

We might have felt the divine in every breeze that blew across the landscape, seen in every flowering plant, wondered at in every butterfly dancing across a meadow in daylight and in every firefly in the evening.

But if in the past we have not been sensitive to the deeper meaning of this continent,
We come here today as pilgrims, not simply to this place along the grasslands but to the entire continent.

Pilgrims, penitent, we bring with us the promise of dedicating ourselves to relieving the oppression we have imposed in the past and beginning a new era in our presence here today.

We begin to understand that the way to the world of the sacred is through the place of our dwelling.

We are finally awakening to the beauty of this land.
We are finally accepting the discipline of this land.
We are finally listening to the teaching of this land.
We are finally absorbed in the delight of this land.

We have come from the far regions of this continent, each of us with our distinctive experience
of the regions whence we come.
We reflect on the 200 million years since this continent broke off from the other continents
and began its distinctive development.

While we learn the sacred quality of this continent in its spatial extent,
we also experience those historical moments of grace whereby all the various features of this continent took on their present modes of expression.

The story of this continent is now our own story,
for while we came here in the later stages of its history we are now integral with what takes place here.
Throughout the future, the story of this continent and our own story will be a single story.

Today we begin to right an ancient wrong,
we wish especially to restore to this continent its ancient joy.
For while much of what we have done is beyond healing,
there is a resilience throughout the land that only awaits its opportunity to
flourish once again with something of its ancient splendor.

So far as we are able, we wish to evoke these powers to their full expression
so that the primordial liturgy of divine praise that once
arose from this continent might again burst forth
in a new brilliance of expression.

We are concerned for the children, the children of every living being on this
continent,
the children of the trees and grasses,
the children of the wolf, the bear and the cougar,
the children of the bluebird and the thrush and the great raptors that
soar through the heavens
the children of the salmon that begin and end their lives in the upper
reaches of the great western rivers,
the children, too, of human parents.
For all the children are born into a single sacred community.

It is increasingly clear that none of the children,
nor any living being on this continent or throughout the entire planet
has any integral future
except in alliance with every other being that finds its home here.

Tonight we come here as pilgrims to this continent to beg a blessing from its
mountains and valleys, and from all their inhabitants.
We beg a blessing that will heal us of our responsibility
for what we have done,
a blessing that will give us the guidance and the healing that we need.

For we can never bring a healing to this continent
until we are first blessed and first healed by this continent.

To make ourselves worthy of this blessing is the task to which we dedicate ourselves in these opening years of the 21st century that all the children of Earth might walk serenely into the future as a single sacred community.

Remarks made originally by Thomas Berry at a Conference on Caring for Creation held in Kansas City some years ago.

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