

The First Earth Church

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In recent centuries, indeed, the believing community has not been concerned with any cosmology, ancient or modern, for the believing community has its real values concentrated in the Savior, the human person, the believing church, and a post-earthly paradisaal beatitude.

—Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*

Thomas Berry has suggested many times we should put the Bible on the shelf for twenty years or more and listen to Earth. In that spirit, I am suggesting that we put the Bible aside and listen to and celebrate Earth in what might be called the “First Earth Church.” In my own life, I have been searching for a community of people to celebrate the Earth with—to participate in what Thomas Berry might call an Earth Liturgy. I visualize it more like an Earth Circle—fellow humans celebrating the “more than human world” and our wonder in being here—a world we have become autistic to according to Berry. It seems to me, we need this affirmation of being part of Earth now more than ever. Whom do we share our deep communion of hawk or flower with and our profound sadness and fear of the 6th extinction we now find ourselves in? We need one another to help us out of this pathological world view that separates us from the natural world, each other, and even ourselves. I have been looking for this deep sharing of our larger self in many types of churches, but I have always felt disappointed. If I was able to endure the service, I usually left feeling like a fraud. I wasn’t feeling what others appeared to be feeling. I was offended by the words spoken most of the time and felt angry. I felt a stab in my chest every time I heard words of a male God, especially in a culture that covertly practices patriarchy. I could not sit still and listen to our ministers and priests holding an afterlife hostage by what we believe about the life of Jesus. A familiar refrain was that you will not be saved unless

you believe in what this particular church believes about Jesus. Not to mention I strongly believe this idea of being saved and of good people and bad people creates a great separation when what we really need is love and acceptance of ourselves, each other, and especially the natural world. I still remember when I was only 12 hearing about purgatory—how those not baptized would not see God—and knowing, even then, they could not be talking about my God. My God would be accepting of everyone. For many years I thought it was just me. Something must be wrong with me for not believing the dogma of most of our churches, but I just couldn't.

I still, however, felt this unspoken awe and wonder and had a great desire for celebration and understanding. I was still drawn to religion to help me express and explore these inner and outer mysteries. Luckily, I did find a few priests who held different views, and when I heard Thomas Berry speak of religious communities as believing communities, it made more sense. Our churches seem to place more value in beliefs than in experience. No one ever asked me what I felt or what my experience of the divine or the world was. I realized the only sacredness I saw in the church seemed to be for the ritual and historical beliefs, not for this gift of life and this wonder of a planet. So, although I was looking for a place to celebrate my awe and wonder, I very seldom felt that need met in our religious institutions. There is a need for a First Earth Church—a church that has less beliefs and more inquiry into the experience of awe and wonder we feel as humans on this awesome and challenging planet.

The historical mission of our time is to re-invent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life systems, in a time developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience.

—Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*

This statement is central in Berry's wisdom and guidance into the Ecozoic era which follows the last 65 million years of the Cenozoic. The Cenozoic, the most verdant time in our planet's history, is coming to an end as all the major systems of the Earth are being

disrupted. The Ecozoic era is a time when humans realize Earth is primary and humans are derivative, and when we learn to live in a mutually enhancing relationship with the Earth. Berry's guidance is pivotal in our healing into the Ecozoic, but where do we go to grapple with its deeper implications? In *The Great Work* Thomas identifies the four major institutions that need to shift if we are to enter this Ecozoic era: the government, the corporation, the university, and the religious institutions. Which of these institutions will facilitate this communion—this deep grappling needed for humans to begin to shift our understanding and story? None of these institutions even admits that a shift is needed, let alone has a willingness to facilitate this shift. However, there is only one that even acknowledges the numinous dimensions of our world, a central awareness paramount to a shift into the Ecozoic, namely the religious institutions.

It is thought that the largest minority in the United States is the nonreligious population. I think many people, like myself, have stopped attending our religious institutions because of some of the reasons I have stated above. And, like me, they are still searching for a community to help them understand their relationship with the more than human world and human world and to understand this connection for which we have no words. This population is growing as humans become more and more aware that we are in a crisis situation on the planet. They are looking for wisdom to go forward—the kind of wisdom that Thomas Berry offers. In the natural world when a species disappears or a need becomes great enough, a niche opens up, and a species appears or moves in to take that space and fulfill that need. We have an open niche right now in our human world—one that wants to share its concern and grapple with the type of wisdom Thomas Berry has to offer. There is a need for this wisdom and there is an open niche, so it makes sense that something like an Earth Church could fulfill that need.

When Thomas Berry talks about story and shared dream experiences, I believe he is referring to our inability to re-think our way into the future. We cannot grasp what we are to do or how we are to be as humans with our current rational minds. We need to re-imagine or dream our way into the future if we are to survive in a mutually enhancing world, if we are to shift into the Ecozoic. All of

our institutions and languages, indeed our thinking, comes out of a paradigm that believes we humans are primary, there is a hierarchy, and we are all separate. In that hierarchy the natural world is valued the least. We don't even see ourselves as a part of the natural world. This illusion of separation is deep in our language. We don't even have a vocabulary that has words for our interconnectedness. We need new words to convey this new story that Earth is primary and we humans are derivative. This separation is even more magnified with our religious institutions using the Bible as primary context. The Bible, while revelatory, is steeped in this language of separation and human hubris. However, Thomas Berry would say the Earth is also revelatory. Maybe a First Earth Church could begin to create a new language to share our story of our larger self and to reflect on our shared dream experiences.

This is the kind of church I want, one that will focus on shared experience and a new story of connectedness. One that wrestles with the challenges we face in our human and more than human world and helps us create words to express our concern and compassion. One that sees through the façade of patriarchy and honors our interconnectedness. One that has the power to break through our autism toward the natural world. One that is a continually emerging celebration and profound adventure into our souls. I know there is movement today in some religious institutions to address some of the issues I have raised. Some churches are doing some very innovative things to include the natural world and search for deeper meaning. This is all good and provides a larger context to live in and community for many who sense there is so much more. But is it enough at this time? I don't know. I only know my own desires and, I believe, the desires of the Earth are not being met, yet. My idea for a First Earth Church is just that: an idea, a dream—a story of community, celebration, and possibilities.

What are your dreams for a community to share our interconnectedness and celebration of our larger self? Where can we find a place to explore what Thomas Berry calls “the Dream of the Earth?” These questions may lead us to the very Earth-centered church we and the Earth itself (indeed, our larger self) need.