



# Baltimore-Washington & Peninsula-Delaware Area

The United Methodist Church

## The Earth Is the Lord's

*Psalm 24:1–6*

Sermon preached by

**Bishop LaTrelle Miller Easterling**

Baltimore-Washington & Peninsula-Delaware Area

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Faithful Resistance: A Public Witness for Immigration Justice

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## The Earth Is the Lord's

*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it, for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters. Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? They who have clean hands and a pure heart, those who do not lift up their souls to an idol or swear by what is false. They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God their Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God. – Psalm 24: 1-6*

The earth is the Lord's. The earth is the Lord's. Beloved, when relaying this Divine proclamation the psalmist does not whisper. The psalmist does not negotiate. The psalmist does not stutter nor stumble when declaring that it all belongs to God. It all belongs to God. Every hill and hamlet. Every ocean and estuary. Every tree and tuft of grass. Every continent and constellation. The sun, the moon and the stars. The earth is the Lord's. It does not belong to empires or corporations, not to colonizers or patriarchs, not even to the church! The earth is the Lord's. The psalmist continues their propaedeutic proclamation when they extol, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof for God has founded it on the seas and established it on the waters." God and God alone created, curated and constructed. God alone is the architect and God's vision for creation compels all who worship God to live according to God's divine design.

This declaration confronts every flag that demands ultimate allegiance, every continent or corporation that hoards land, every nation-state that dares to wage war to steal land for power or profit. Psalm 24 shatters the arrogance of borders that pretend to be eternal and policies that pretend to be holy. The psalmist announces that no government, no regime, no market system, no dominant race can lay ultimate claim to what God alone owns.

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Yet beloved, when we build immigration systems that decide some lives are expendable, some families deportable, some children detainable, and some bodies are criminal simply for crossing a line drawn by colonizers, we act as if we are the owners of God's creation. When we separate families, deny asylum, build detention camps, and turn away those fleeing violence and climate catastrophe, catastrophes often caused by our own consumption, we are declaring that we own the earth and have agency over its use. That is theological, ethical and moral malfeasance. And we find ourselves here because we succumbed to a heretical understanding of possession. Let me break it down this way. There is a book titled, *The Miseducation of the Negro*. It is a foundational critique of how formal education in the United States has historically inculcated into people of African descent an internalized inferiority and dependence, rather than to cultivate liberation, self-knowledge, and community power. Rather than empowering them, the school system offered a curriculum that espoused supremacy as normative. The author, Carter Woodson, goes on to state that this system produces individuals who are technically educated but psychologically colonized.

Well, I posit that a similar errancy exists in our theological pedagogy. I believe what we have experienced in much of Western Christianity is the "Miseducation of the Baptized." Too many are technically educated, yet theologically colonized. We have misunderstood the nature of possession and what God intended for creation. We have been taught that some are more entitled to land than others. That some are inherently entitled to freedom while others can only exist in subservient postures. We have been taught that some countries are more noble than others and that God has ordained a hierarchical system of worth and wealth. This theological colonization shows up when Christians defend immigration policies that privilege wealth, whiteness and Western passports while criminalizing Black and Brown bodies from the Global South. It shows up when asylum seekers are called "invaders," when refugees are framed as threats, when individuals are profiled for speaking their native tongue, when those trying to follow the law are arrested outside of courtrooms and blamed for their plight rather than the systems that betrayed them. This is not just bad politics. This is bad theology.

To deconstruct this malformed understanding we have to go back to the beginning. When God created all that is and gave humanity stewardship over it, God did not intend that we would possess to the point of exclusion; own to the point of expulsion; inherit to the point of permanent dispossession. In God's economy no family, nation, corporation or race is entitled to obscene wealth while others are crushed. But beloved, our current systems ensure that land, wealth, power and security accumulate in the hands of the few while immigrants are displaced, incarcerated, and deported. That is antithetical to the will of God. That is the theology of Pharaoh dressed in twenty-first century clothes.

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Psalm 24 can free our minds from errant theology and disabuse us of misunderstanding God's divine plan. Psalm 24 has been described as an entrance liturgy or processional hymn, used in royal ceremonies. And while that is true, to relegate it to that rendering alone misses the deeper profession of faith it exacts upon our discipleship. Psalm 24 is a powerful affirmation of the sovereignty of Almighty God and a proper understanding of the intended relationship between the Creator and the created, between human being to human being. God took chaos and created order and blessed it as holy. Those who desire to enter God's presence must also be holy. The Psalm instructs as it asks, "Who may enter into God's presence and who may enter the reign of God?" Those with clean hands and pure hearts. This demonstrates that God is not interested in performative piety nor superficial spirituality. God is interested in transformed lives; those intent on worshiping God and God alone and living together as one human family under God's love, care and provision.

Beloved, you cannot claim clean hands when those hands sign policies that cage children. You cannot purport pure hearts when those hearts fear refugees more than they fear injustice. You cannot preach the Beatitudes while endorsing systems that deny the poor access to safety, shelter, and dignity. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," but we criminalize the poor. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," but we profit from war and then reject those fleeing it. Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful," but mercy is often missing in our convoluted, expensive and protracted immigration policies. Perhaps this is why some theological strands want to focus solely on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ rather than understanding that the salvific work of Christ is for the community. The scripture that so many love to place on placards and waive in stadiums says, "For God so loved the *world!*" Perhaps they understand that if they can keep us focused on the individual, it will distract us from the conniving of the institution. It reminds me of the quote, "When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray.'" We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land."

Scholars teach us that there are connections between the best of the Old and New Testaments found in this Psalm. There is a connection between Psalm 24 and the Ten Commandments; and there is a connection between this Psalm and The Sermon on the Mount. Oh beloved, can't you hear it? "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other God's before me," redounds with, "Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false." Beloved, when we worship power, wealth, and empire, we are lifting our souls to what is false. We have fashioned idols out of military might, market dominance, racial hierarchy, and national exceptionalism. That is a violation of the first commandment. When we treat supremacy as normative and divine, when we treat capitalism as sacred, when we treat borders as holy, we are bowing to golden calves. And do you not see the connection? "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," resonates with

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“Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.” The instruction par excellence of both testaments can be found embedded in this 24<sup>th</sup> Psalm, within this call to righteousness.

If the earth is the Lord’s, then land is not a trophy. Land is testimony. Land is covenant. Land is sacred trust. But somewhere along the way, Christianity forgot whose land this is. Or perhaps even worse, Christianity remembered and still chose power.

In Leviticus God said, “The land is mine; you are but tenants and sojourners.” The land was not to be sold in perpetuity, that one might begin to believe they had perpetual, inherent ownership. Rather, it was to be understood as a communal commodity, a gift for the blessing and benefit of all. But we turned tenants into tyrants. We turned sojourners into threats. We turned gift into greed. When immigration systems are designed to protect wealth rather than human dignity, that is structural sin. When visas flow easily for investors and tourists but not for farmworkers, domestic workers, and refugees, we are revealing who we believe matters. That is not the gospel.

Theologian, professor and author Willie James Jennings teaches that colonial Christianity fused land, race, and theology into a violent imagination. He writes that Christianity “learned to see the world through the eyes of conquest,” and that this imagination reshaped what Christians believed about God, bodies, and belonging. Christianity traded the gospel of belonging for the gospel of possession. Through the twin terrors of the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny those driven by greed and conquest determined that rather than it all belonging to God, it belonged to the powerful; to the mighty, to the victor. But this conquest ideology is not God’s design for creation. Genesis begins not with domination but with blessing. Not with patriarchy but with shared vocation. Not with conquest but with delight. And the cross teaches there can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with the despised, humiliated and abused. A gospel that does not side with the oppressed is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It all belongs to God. The earth is the Lord’s, and they that dwell therein. God’s love is not restricted to citizens, nor the documented, nor those with visas and passports. They that dwell therein. Do we not understand that the Bible is relentless about the stranger. “You shall love the foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.” Jesus crossed borders, fled violence, depended on hospitality. But Christianity baptized nationalism. We wrapped exclusion in Scripture. We built walls and called them wisdom. Beloved, when we fear the migrant, we must remember that Jesus was one himself.

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I would be remiss if I did not address a growing phenomenon within some congregations. Some congregations are not only placing flags in the sanctuary and on the altar, but also reciting the Pledge of Allegiance during worship even as Isaiah 56: 6-7 declares, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.” While the American flag and the highest values it represents is due our respect, it is not the symbol of our salvation and redemption. That designation belongs To the cross of Christ alone. And the eagle never flies higher than the cross. Understand that if you say God bless America you are asking God to bless Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, The United States, Canada and Puerto Rico!

Thanks be to God we have gathered to embody a faithful resistance. Thanks be to God that we are declaring with our bodies that we will no longer stand in complicity with injustice. Thanks be to God we are declaring with our voices that we will no longer be silent amid the harm. Beloved, this is a call to repentance and re-imagination. This is a theological summons. This is United Methodism at its core. Our Social Principles call congregations to welcome migrants, refugees and immigrants. Our Social Principles call United Methodists to commit ourselves to concrete support, including helping our brothers and sisters to navigate the immigration process. Our concrete support is to include food, housing, education and employment.

The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof. If the earth is the Lord’s, then empire is not eternal and borders are not barriers. Let the Church respect the land as God’s. Let the Church welcome the stranger as Christ. Let the Church dismantle patriarchy as heresy. Let the Church see the earth as holy ground. And if it belongs to God, then it must belong to justice, it must belong to mercy, it must belong to love.

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