

**A RIVER RUNS THROUGH US:
OUR PLACE IN THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY**

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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John Daniel is a nature writer who grew up in the East and, like the composer of “Oh, Shenandoah,” was beckoned westward. In his memoir, he recalls an unforgettable childhood experience on the Blue Ridge—an adventure in which a frightening experience was transformed into a mystical appreciation of the natural beauty of the Blue Ridge and Shenandoah Valley. At the age of twelve, he set out one summer day on a hike from his family’s rustic cabin on the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge. Instead of following the trail, he decided to head uphill cross-country through the thickets. Suddenly he found himself in the middle of a boulder field with the buzzing sound of rattlesnakes hidden in the rocks below his feet. He decided to make a dash across the boulders, slipping at one point and gashing his leg. Eventually he made it up to his destination on the Appalachian Trail.

“I drank from my canteen, ate my sandwiches, and looked a long time at a view I’d seen before but never so vividly, never like this. The brown Shenandoah River looped evenly through forest and patched farmland, lazy as all time, and beyond the river the Allegheny Mountains ranged away into the hazy West, ridge after folded ridge, as far as I could see. I sat, my arms around my drawn-up knees, watching with a wild exaltation. A wind sang in the pines and sang in me. Everything I saw, everything I heard and smelled, had the perfect clarity of the boulders as I’d studied them. Everything seemed strange and familiar, exactly as it needed to be. I kept thinking these words: *The world is a dream, and the dream is true*. The slow Shenandoah, the blue Alleghenies, the wind with its tune of yearning, the height where I rested, the sunny boulders, the rattlesnakes unseen in their dark chambers, the land lying west beyond my view where I knew I would live someday—all of it was true, and strangest part was that *I* was true, somehow I was there, watching it and part of it at the same time.” [John Daniel, “Boulder Dance,” in Michael P. Branch and Daniel J. Philippon (eds.), *The Height of Our Mountains*, p. 345]

That sense of belonging —of being deeply connected to our natural surroundings—is the basis for my monthly sermon series titled “Our Place.” It is what I felt when I pulled my bicycle onto a scenic overlook on the Skyline Drive and gazed out across this Valley toward the mountain range to the west. Someday, I said to myself, this place will be my home. The neatly divided farms reminded me of the gently rolling landscape of eastern Ohio where I spent my childhood years, while the surrounding mountain vistas offered the same sense of stability as the West Virginia mountains where my children grew up.

Scott Russell Sanders, who also grew up in Ohio, quotes Henry David Thoreau: “‘The man who is often thinking that it is better to be somewhere else than where he is excommunicates himself.’ The metaphor is religious: To withhold yourself from where you are is to be cut off from communion with the source. It has taken me half a lifetime of searching to realize that the likeliest path to the ultimate ground leads through my local ground. I mean the land itself, with its creeks and rivers, its weather, seasons, stone outcroppings, and all the plants and animals that share it. I cannot have a spiritual center without having a geographical one. I cannot live a grounded life without being grounded in a *place*.” [Scott Russell Sanders, “Homeplace: A Few Words on Behalf of Staying Put,” in Northwest Earth Institute, *Exploring Deep Ecology*, pp. VIII-7 & 8]

This place where we live is truly ancient. Its geological history is long and complicated, and I confess (or complain?) that the terminology for explaining it is quite confusing. This much I can tell you: More than 300 million years ago, long before the formation of the Himalayan and Rocky mountain ranges, “What is now Africa and Europe crunched onto North America . . . with a great shove that buckled the rocks into the folds and faults that we see today in the Blue Ridge.” [Keith Frye, *Roadside Geology of Virginia*, p. 103] “This mountain building process is very similar to what is currently occurring in California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska; in the Valley area, 400 or so million years ago, earthquakes and volcanic explosions were common just as they are today on the West Coast. . . . The Blue Ridge is estimated to have been just over 40,000 feet high.” [William M. Gardner, *Lost Arrowheads and Broken Pottery*, p. 4] In other words, the low and steady profile of the Blue Ridge that I view from my home study was at one time more than 10,000 feet higher than Mt. Everest!

The river that has given our valley home its name is likewise ancient. As Julia Davis explains, “The streams of this region originally drained it to the east and south, but the Shenandoah, then a sporadic young torrent, began at Harpers Ferry with a gully that turned itself into a gulch, cut its channel up the Valley, and ‘pirated’ the heads of the earlier rivers [including the South River] by undercutting and diverting their waters into its own. From this process came the numerous ‘wind gaps’ in the Blue Ridge—openings now high and dry above the floor that were once the channels of vanished rivers. Finally the Shenandoah flowed north where it joined the Potomac as it made its way around the new mountain chain. Water has ceaselessly sculpted more than the surface of the Valley. Under the ground, uncounted rivers once ran through the limestone, dissolving the rock with the sulphuric acid in their waters, hollowing out caverns. The Natural Bridge is one such cave, with the roof fallen in.” [Julia Davis, *Shenandoah*, pp. 9, 12]

The origin and meaning of the word “Shenandoah” are obscure. The most romantic meaning assigned to it is “Daughter of the Stars”—supposedly from an Indian legend. It is most fitting that the name is attributed to a Native American source. More than **ten thousand** years before the first European ever laid eyes on the Valley, the first group of humans entered the Shenandoah Valley—descendants of people who crossed the land mass that connected Siberia and Alaska during the last great glacial age and then fanned out throughout North and South America. They were drawn here by the abundance of game animals and the presence of a very specific type of rock called **jasper**

that could be formed into spearpoints for hunting them. They settled in small communities along the banks of the South Fork of the Shenandoah. In 1971 excavation of the Thunderbird site six miles south of Front Royal yielded evidence of the oldest known structure in all of North America.

By the time the first European explorers arrived in the 1700s, the resident Native American population had all but vanished, and the Valley had become a seasonal hunting ground for rival Indian tribes from all directions. At first the relations between the Indians and Europeans were cordial, but as more white settlers streamed into the Valley to claim land for farming, clashes became more frequent and more violent, amplified by the rivalry among European powers for control of this new frontier. The Shenandoah Valley was first explored by Virginians from the east, but it was settled mainly by migrants from Pennsylvania to the north. Most of them came from groups who had been refugees from religious persecution in Europe: German Mennonites and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, who were eager to form independent faith communities. The vitality of conservative Mennonite communities to this day is a testimony to their perseverance and resiliency.

The legacy of independence that has been the Valley's greatest strength in the past now poses the greatest threat to its future. Belonging to a place **also** means taking responsibility for its preservation. The famous passage attributed to Chief Seattle reminds us, "The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth." Unfortunately, many of our fellow citizens do not share this worldview, regarding the Earth as merely a "natural resource" for satisfying present human needs. In spite of its ancient heritage and tranquil beauty, the "Daughter of the Stars" is no match for the insatiable needs and ambitious plans of generations past and present.

The threats to the environmental integrity of our beloved Valley come from far and near. In Shenandoah National Park, "the most conspicuous environmental problem is the decrease in **visibility** that has occurred over the past few decades. The average visibility in the park region is estimated to have decreased from about 65 miles in the early 1900s to about 15 miles today. . . . The smog is sometimes so thick that Massanutten Mountain, less than 10 miles away, cannot be seen. . . . In the Shenandoah area, nearly 85 percent of the light-scattering pollutants are sulfate particles, most of which result from the combustion of coal at electricity generating plants. Most of the sulfate enters the region from outside areas, especially from the heavily industrialized Ohio River Valley west of the Appalachians. . . . Today, rain in the Shenandoah averages over 20 times . . . and at times more than 100 times more acidic than normal rainwater." [John A Conners, *Shenandoah National Park: An Interpretive Guide*, p. 99]

A more immediate local threat is the high level of mercury found in the waters of the Shenandoah River, which kills some fish and renders others unsafe for human consumption. When this problem was first discovered in the 1970s, it was attributed to factories located on the river, but its persistence suggests a more widespread source: the high-intensity poultry industry. Urbie Nash will discuss this at the first of our ten o'clock Sunday morning forums on March 16th.

It is up to us who cherish the quality of life here in this ancient Valley to protect its fragile beauty. As Julia Davis wrote, “The Valley is the earth itself, fecund, rewarding, rolling in gentle checkered fields to the Blue Ridge that guards it like a wall. . . More than history, the Valley is a way of life. It is the rich fields, and the mountains older than measured time. It is the stillness of a hot noon, or of moonlight, or of snow. It is the calm old houses, where the oak leaves and the doves have time to set up their music in the heart of a child. The Valley is home.” [*Shenandoah*, p. 2] It is our place to take care of the Daughter of the Stars.