

Pilgrim in the Southwest: Sacred things in the desert

by [Talitha Arnold](#) in the [June 21, 2000](#) issue

When I moved back to the Southwest, the first thing I noticed was color. Green is not a dominant color in New Mexico. The landscape is brown and red and sometimes golden at sunset, but not green. There is very little that reflects the Christian hymnody of “field and forest, flowery meadow, flashing sea.” This is a land of little rain, and of life that adapts to that scarcity.

The second thing I noticed was the age of things, especially sacred things. Catholic churches predate New England meetinghouses. Pueblo kivas were built long before the Catholics came. The ruins of the Anasazi or “Ancient Ones” date back to the time of Christ.

When I moved from Connecticut to New Mexico, I wasn’t a complete stranger to this land. I grew up in Arizona and learned to love saguaros, palo verdes and desert vistas. I remember the power of the Indian dances at the state fair and the mystery of the Catholic mission churches with their candles and statues of saints and virgins.

When I decided to go to seminary, I went to New England, but made sure my mother sent me care packages of tortillas and green chili. I returned to the Southwest in 1987 to serve in Santa Fe. It’s primarily an “Anglo immigrant” community. If our members have a church background, it’s generally Reformed Protestant. Compared to either our Native American or Hispanic Catholic neighbors, we are the new kids on the religious scene.

My ministry and faith, as well as the faith and ministry of the church I serve, have been enriched by interaction with the Native American and Catholic traditions of this region. Two lessons stand out. One, I have learned a deeper appreciation of God’s presence in this wilderness land, and two, I have learned to appreciate sacred things and sacred places alongside the Protestant emphasis on the sacred word.

The early Protestant immigrants to the Southwest generally saw their mission as taming the wilderness and converting the heathen. They came to civilize and save, not to learn from the land or its peoples. Coming from the more populated lands of the East Coast or the cultivated farms of the Midwest, the Anglo-American settlers experienced the West as wilderness. The desert was a strange barren land filled with strange frightening creatures—rattlesnakes and scorpions, Roman Catholics and Indians. A young Congregational girl from Connecticut was heading west with her family in 1870. “Goodbye, God,” she wrote in her journal, “we’re moving to Montana.”

Once in the Southwest wilderness, the Protestant pioneers immediately began to re-create what they had left behind. Biblical imagery shaped their vision as they worked to “make the desert bloom.” The Arizona Salt River Project quoted Isaiah in literature that encouraged water projects and urban development. The new westerners’ favorite hymns included “The Little Church in the Wildwood” and “Shall We Gather at the River?”—interesting selections for an area with fewer than ten inches of rain a year.

For the Navajo, Hopi, Papago and other Native Americans already living in the Southwest, the land was sacred. Like the Christians, they cherished their own stories of creation and of human movement from one world into another. But unlike the Christians, they did not mourn a lost Eden or exile from an idyllic garden to a harsh wilderness. Instead, they told of a gradual progression from one world to the next, with each world being more beautiful, more harmonious and more abundant than the last. For example, the Navajo creation story ends in the Fourth World, or the Southwest. The terrain that eastern and midwestern immigrants experienced as wilderness and wasteland is the Navajo’s Eden.

The Native Americans farmed and used the land, but unlike the Euro-American immigrants, they did not have the driving motivation to improve, transform or change it. Instead, their primary goal was to live in harmony with creation as they found it.

To the Native Americans, the Southwest is holy ground. As Jews and Christians have stories about Mount Sinai, the Jordan River or the Red Sea, the Navajos have stories about Pederal Peak, where Changing Woman emerged, and Canyon de Chelly, where Spider Woman lived. The Southwest tribes still live in their sacred land in sight of their sacred places.

The Hispanic Catholics held a similar understanding of the land and its sacred quality. Like the later Anglo immigrants, the first explorers and settlers of New Spain saw the land through utilitarian lenses. They came looking for cities of gold and abundant land for farms and ranches. But their Iberian peninsula was similar in topography and climate to the new lands of the Southwest, so by the time East Coast immigrants arrived two centuries later, the Southwest was home for the Spanish. A hymn of the Chimayo region from the early 1700s reflects this sense:

From the earth I was made,
And earth shall eat me,
The earth has sustained me,
And at last earth I shall be also.

Even with air conditioning and swimming pools, the move to the Southwest is still a move to alien territory for many people. As one East Coast friend said, "It looks like the moon." Some newcomers experience fear and disorientation in this wilderness land, the same fear and disorientation that made our ancestors want to dam the rivers, build artificial lakes and otherwise tame this desert.

Several years ago I spent a summer sabbatical on the Navajo reservation. I hiked the canyons and mesas and read everything I could of Navajo creation accounts, the Blessingway and other sacred texts. When I returned home, I reread Genesis with new eyes. When that congregation in Connecticut sang, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," I remembered the colors of Canyon de Chelly and the Navajo understanding that *this* world is sacred and to be loved.

The Native American and Hispanic Catholic appreciation of the desert gives new meaning to the wilderness images of Christian scripture. For the Hebrews, after all, the Sinai desert was where people learned who God was and who they were and how they were connected to that God. For the Navajo, life in the wilderness is life based on *hozhoni*, an understanding of balance and blessing, a concept not unlike that of covenant, a central belief in the Reformed Protestant tradition.

The United Church of Santa Fe has tried to incorporate that understanding of creation in its worship space. The sanctuary incorporates the four elements of creation: earth, represented in an adobe tram wall; water, in an *acequia*, or fountain that is both a reminder of baptism and a symbol of the irrigation ditches of northern New Mexico; fire, in a kiva fireplace; and wind.

The Spanish Catholics brought an understanding of “sacred times” or “sacred places” that often dovetailed with that of the Native Americans. As Elizabeth Kay observes in the *Chimayo Valley Traditions*, Spanish priests realized that linking pagan rites to Christian beliefs would help them convert the Indians to Catholicism, a method referred to as “baptizing the customs.” One example was the observance of saints’ days, which happened to coincide with the traditional planting and harvest dance days of the Native Americans.

Another custom was baptizing the land and designating places as sacred. At the Santuario at Chimayo the dirt inside the chapel is said to have healing powers. Every year during the Holy Week, thousands of Catholic and Protestant pilgrims walk to the Santuario from as far away as Albuquerque. Before the Catholics claimed the area for their chapel, the Pueblo Indians regarded the valley and nearby hill (Tsi Mayhoh) as a sacred place of healing. At United, we’ve learned the power of liturgy and sacred actions from our Native American and Hispanic Catholic neighbors. A few years ago, when a young man was ordained at the United Church, he invited two Native elders with whom he had studied to bless him with eagle feathers as part of the ordination prayer. The gentle sound of the brush of feathers as we prayed over him gave the service a new dimension.

United also has a “sister church” relationship with a predominantly Hispanic Catholic congregation. Though my Pilgrim ancestors might disapprove, I join the priest in blessing the animals on St. Francis Day and in walking the stations of the cross for persons with AIDS on Palm Sunday. Our congregation participates in the processional to the Cross of the Martyrs at the end of Fiestas and hosts an evening of Las Posadas before Christmas.

For both Fiesta Sunday and All Saints Day, we use *santos* (painted wood panels of saints) and *bultos* (carved wooden statues of saints) on the altar. These paintings and statues remind us that there is more than one way of being Christian and that God’s people come in all colors.

Several years ago, we built an outdoor celebration circle in the shape of a pueblo kiva where we begin the Easter sunrise services and also celebrate baptisms, evening vespers and an interfaith Earth Day celebration. On the altar, we often use Navajo or Hopi baskets and weavings made of native materials, along with a cholla cactus cross, in place of traditional floral arrangements.

As we newcomers learn about life and faith in this land, we receive some amazing blessings. Our administrative assistant is a Navajo woman who grew up on the reservation and whose mother worked at the Episcopal mission in Fort Defiance. This past Thanksgiving, she offered a Navajo blessing as the invocation for the Sunday service. Before she did it, she stood at the mike and looked out at the white and Hispanic faces of the congregation, and remarked, "Welcome, all you pilgrims!"

The people looked startled for a second, then they cheered, laughed and clapped. It felt like being welcomed home.