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God as Realtor

Pat Marrin | Jun. 23, 2009 NCR Today

"All the land that you see I will give to you." Gen 13:15

North central Kansas is home to one of the most significant yet little known monuments in North America. A stone marker and metal plate located in a place called Meades Ranch, Kan., is the geodetic base point for all the survey lines in North America. I have often wondered why some adventurous high school class, as their departing prank, has not gone there at night and moved the marker, theoretically altering every property line in the country.

The notion of private property is a fixed point in human history. The story of Abraham's call by God to migrate from the ancient Iraqi city of Ur to take possession of the land of Canaan is sometimes taken as justification for modern Israel's displacement of the Palestinians from their "promised land."

American history weaves religious entitlement into legal claims about ownership of the New Land. One might wonder if the native peoples who helped Lewis and Clark knew that they were surveyors of the vast portion of the continent known as the Louisiana Purchase that had just been "sold" by France to the United States. Their ancestral plains and forests would be surveyed, divided criss-crossed with roads, fances and iron tracks bringing millions of Europeans to take up residence on the land, declaring it private property.

William Faulkner, whose novels are all situated in fictitious Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi, notes that the native people's did not know about private property until the European settlers told then they could sell the forests they hunted in to them for money and horses. Faulkner sees the original sin of the American nation in this arrival of European culture and later, the industrial-scale timbering and agribusiness that destroyed the wilderness, using for cheap labor the institution of slavery that turned people into private property.

The biblical story of the Fall is about human degradation but also about turning the earth from a garden into a desert. It is the story of limitless abundance to be shared by all directed instead into a violent history of wars to control access to land for wood, rubber, oil, coffee and bananas as marketable commodities, and now, even water and air as scarce resources to be controlled and sold.

The seal of inevitability is stamped on history by the winners. Religion has too often served the status quo, making God into the great Realtor who apportions land to some and not to others. Judgment has always seemed far off, but may be closer than we think. For our own survival, history needs to be turned in a different direction, towards community and hospitality, justice and stewardship of the earth. In the end, the only property any of us

really owns -- our soul -- is not for sale, but still must be redeemed, for its measuring lines are grounded in eternity.

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