

Communion With Creation

Psalm 148

Blessing of the Animals/World Communion Sunday

CCUMC

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Poetry

The language of this psalm resounds with hymnody and poetic language. Psalm 148 sings praises eleven times to the glorious Lord of Israel, and the wonders of the world God has created. Like the psalmist, poets throughout the generations have been inspired by creation. Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. Oh, morning at the brown brink eastward springs—because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”¹ Like the psalmist speaks of the heavens and its lights, so too does Hopkins rhapsodize over the coming sunrise as gift from God. The psalmist includes all members of creation—animate and inanimate—in a relationship of praise. Contemporary poet Wendell Berry reflects in a poem on the beauty of current creation in relation to the beginning of creation itself. He pens, “To sit and look at light-filled leaves. May let us see, or seem to see, Far backward through clearer eyes To what unsighted hope believes: The blessed conviviality That sang Creations seventh sunrise.”² The beauty of autumn in Colorado inspires us all to render praise to the One who made it, to sing praise to the Lord from the heavens, to let all of us our Creator bless.

Psalm 148 Patterns after Genesis

Ancient peoples, like the composer of this psalm, also felt the swelling of their hearts at the beauty of all around them. The Israelites understood the wonder of creation out of the Genesis chapters 1-2 account. The writer of Psalm 148, who wrote after 538BC, would have been steeped in the order of the Genesis story. First, God created the heavens, then

¹ Gerald Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur.”

² Wendell Berry, “To Sit and Look at Light-Filled Leaves”

the sun, moon, and stars. The psalmist also begins with the heavens as praising God—“Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!” Then the psalmist instructs the celestial bodies of the sun, moon, and stars. The Genesis account moves to the creation of vegetation, and so too does the Psalmist call for even mountains and hills, trees and cedars to praise God. Next in the Genesis account, God creates “living creatures of every kind, cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” Following this, the psalmist calls for “Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds” to praise God. Lastly, in both the Genesis account and in this psalm, humans appear to praise the name of the Lord.

Lessons from Psalm 148

By following this account of Genesis, the psalmist teaches us two things. First of all, all is included in praise of God; the psalm offers a holistic inclusivity to praise. Heavenly bodies, weather systems, vegetation, animals and humans are all swept up in the grandeur of God and are called to praise. We humans are merely partners in the praise chorus of all of creation back to God. This psalm teaches the inseparability of theology and ecology.

Secondly, in its following of Genesis the psalmist teaches us of our relationship with creation. Note that in the list we come last; this ordering reminds us that we do not have supremacy—though we tend to act otherwise. The psalmist calls us to join our voices to the humming of the heavenly spheres, to the singing of streams, to the lowing of cattle and the trilling of birds. We are not soloists in this hymn of praise; we are the harmony. We are called to sing, live, and be in communion with all the rest of our neighbors in this great, grandeur of creation. St. Basil the Great, writing in the fourth century, said that “God has united the entire world which is composed of many different parts, by the law of indissoluble friendship, in communion and harmony, so that the most distant things seem to

be joined together by one and the same sympathy”³ This psalm calls us to a communion of praise, and ultimately of relationship with all the rest of creation. St Francis of Assisi, who lived in the 12th century and had a legendary relationship with animals, understood too that we are to be in partnership. The opening song that we sang, “ All Creatures of Our God and King” is based upon his canticle of creation. He wrote, and we sang, “O brother wind, air, clouds, and rain” “O sister water” “Dear mother earth”; Francis understood we are in relationship with all of creation—even weather patterns—like the psalmist. He urges us too into a praise of communion.

However, very unfortunately, this has not been the way humans have understood their role in creation. Throughout time, people have read Genesis 1:28’s call to “have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” as a license to conquer, subdue, exploit, dominate, rape, and pillage the things of this earth. Norman Wirzba, a professor of theology and ecology at Duke, reminds us that we are created in the image of God. This means that “we are to exhibit in our thought and life the full excellence of creation. . . our lives, in other words, can be the occasion for the beauty, peace, and goodness of creation to become more pronounced and effective.”⁴ Images of exploitation and oppression do not illumine the character of God we are to profess. Instead, to have dominion means to be like a dome or cathedral spire that dominates the landscape—not by “exploiting its surroundings, but by refocusing and opening up our vision on what is there.”⁵ Perhaps we too are meant to exercise dominion in the sense of opening up new possibilities for the place of creation that were formerly not visible. Perhaps the meaning of dominion is one that “is focused on

³ St. Basil the Great, *Homelia Hexameron* 2.2

⁴ Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵ *Ibid*, 125.

transformation and healing rather than control or exploitation.”⁶ Perhaps when we praise the Creator, we are also to be lead into a healing communion with all other creatures, plants, and heavenly bodies.

Wendell Berry, not only a poet, but a Kentucky farmer, agriculturist, essayist, theologian, and novelist, has thought deeply about how we might be in communion with creation—and the fact that we must eat in order to survive—so we inevitably have to literally partake of creation to sustain ourselves. Berry writes, “We can (not) live harmlessly or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. The point is, when we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament; when we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. . . in such desecration, we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.”⁷ To be in communion means to take what we need for our survival with reverence, acknowledging the gift that other forms of life, whether vegetation or animal, are giving to us.

Part of what helps us to practice knowing, loving, skillful breaking of the body and shedding of the blood of creation is to share in the bread and the wine, the body and the blood Christ offers us. This sacrament teaches us to be reverent toward the gifts of the field—the grapes and the wheat—and to recognize that the material gifts of creation are inextricably interwoven with the spiritual ones. As we partake of communion in just a moment, let this be a time when we join our praise to the praise of all creation for what God has done for us. On this World Communion Sunday, let us remember that we are bound up with the sun and the moon, the fire and the rain, the wild animals and creeping things. After

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Wendell Berry, quoted in Introduction of *Food and Faith: Justice, Joy, and Daily Bread* edited by Michael Schut (New York: Morehouse, 2009), 9.

worship, when we bring our pets back to church (12:30pm) we will practice communion with creation by blessing these animals—recognizing that they are created by God and endowed with the ability to praise as well. Graham Gordon, another farmer writes, “When we encounter an animal acting in its nature, accepting its nature, reveling in its nature, such as a lamb jumping or a cat yawning, we are transported back to the undisturbed beauty of creation and can proclaim with God, “It is good.” It is indeed good. Genesis tells us that, Psalm 148 tells us that. “Let us praise the Lord! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let us all praise the name of the Lord! Amen