

Let Creation Sing

Sometimes, when my spiritual energy is running low, I go outside and try to feel how the breezes are blowing not around but through my body. I am a porous thing of the wind, miraculously held in place by skin—or, as quantum physics might tell us, “a holistic entanglement of immaterial energy waves,” as are all material things.¹

This dissolves the superior view of human-hood over against creation of which I find myself frequently guilty and places me in solidarity with all that is around me, animate and inanimate. The experience of being in solidarity with God’s creation is a form of prayer. Listen, and you can hear all creation singing.

Everywhere there is life, there is song. The Bible tells us that the entire breadth of creation shares equally with human beings in actively praising God. “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it,” we sing in Psalm 96, “let the field exult, and everything in it” (vv. 11b–12a; NRSV). In Psalm 98, “Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together with joy” (v. 8). In Isaiah 55 the trees, too, shall clap their hands and the mountains and hills “shall burst into song” (v. 12). And in Isaiah 35, “the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing” (vv. 1b–2a).

Can you hear the sunflowers singing?

If we think of liturgy in our worship life as “the work of the people”—all the things we do to praise and give thanks to God—then the liturgy of the nonhuman world resides in the activity of all those parts of God’s creation that express their essential nature. “Your works praise you so that we may love you,” Augustine says to God in his *Confessions*. Male mourning doves coo across housetops in search of lifetime mates. Quaking aspen sway in the breezes in gentle salutation. Dolphins leap out of the water, often in perfect tandem, keeping their senses sharp while also having fun. Bees go about their busy-ness of pollination, making possible about one-third of the food we eat. By late summer the seas of corn tassels will be waving to us.

But here in the Anthropocene, Earth’s most recent geologic period that is best described as human-dominated, we have largely lost our ability to experience the liturgical life of the nonhuman world. This is because humanity has asserted itself as nature’s most decisive force.

Humans are making decisions that are altering the earth’s weather patterns, which in turn affect which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will be closed. At a recent synod workshop in

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South-Central Wisconsin, the presenter offered abundant evidence that “global warming is the biggest crisis facing the well-being of our planet.”²

Additionally, some of humankind’s best efforts—or at least intentions—to address environmental problems are now themselves under attack, as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) faces steep cuts under the current proposed national budget. Recent efforts to compel the EPA to regulate toxic air emissions from factory farms, for example, are likely to come to nothing. The massive Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, which since 2010 has provided more than \$2.2 billion for programs to improve and protect the Great Lakes, is simply zeroed out.

A report from the recent Biological Extinction conference at the Vatican states that one in five species on earth now faces extinction. That will rise to 50 percent by the end of this century unless urgent action is taken. American songbirds are being decimated by global warming, habitat loss, wind turbines, and free-ranging domestic cats, which you may be surprised to learn kill some 3 billion songbirds each year. Nine billion animals are bred each year on US factory farms in abysmal conditions which never allow these creatures to express their natural behaviors, their own distinctive liturgies of praise.



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The website ongreenplanet.org reports that “the rise of the factory farm has meant that billions of animals have had to endure a life which can only be described as cruel and barbaric. A life without ever feeling the sun on their back, fresh air in their lungs, and without the freedom to fully extend their limbs, flap their wings, or exhibit their natural behaviors. A deeper look into the lives of factory-farmed animals reveals that we have created a huge prison system for animals where they are no longer considered sentient beings, capable of feelings, thoughts, and pain, but instead are treated as products on an assembly line from the moment they are born to the moment they are murdered.”

We are living in the most important environmental century in the history of the planet. Yet creation is groaning all around us.

In his 2015 encyclical “*Laudato Si*” (“On Care for Our Common Home”), Pope Francis writes that “our Sister, Mother

Earth ... now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will.” (The Pope presented US President Donald Trump with a copy on his visit to the Vatican last month.)

Benjamin Stewart of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago said in a compelling talk at the 2015 Institute of Liturgical Studies in Valparaiso, IN,³ that in the gospels Jesus is continually calling us into solidarity with the voices of the vulnerable. We are exhorted to act, as did the widow in Luke 18 who badgers an indifferent judge so relentlessly that he finally gives in to her demands for justice, just to get her off his back. “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?” Jesus declares (Luke 17:7).

Activism is important. But all that we do as Christians

emerges out of prayer, where we draw our strength from the wellspring of the crucified Christ.

Prayer fuels our yearning to reconnect with the source of all life. In so doing we may bring what Stewart called the earth’s “groaning silent voices” and their silenced liturgies into our prayer—the pigs who never snuffled in the mud, the hens who never flapped their wings, the cows who were never able to exercise their maternal instincts.

As you deepen your participation in the prayer life of creation, be creative in your imagining. For example, in a 2016 article Stewart imagines prefacing the *Sanctus* with words such as these: “And so, with angels and archangels, with the cats and the seagulls, with the sequoias and the stars, the dogs and dolphins, with people in every language and in every place, with the gift of mercy on our lips, we praise God’s name and join the unending hymn.”⁴

As you reconnect with outdoors this summer, let your prayer run free and see where it takes you. ■

Endnotes

1. Arjun Walla, “Nothing Is Solid and Everything Is Energy—Scientists Explain the World of Quantum Physics,” *Collective Evolution*, Sept. 27, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1tUobSg>.
2. National Geographic offers a user-friendly scientific perspective on the subject at www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/global-warming-effects/.
3. “All Creatures Look to You for Food in Due Season: Prayers We Have in Common with Other Creatures.”
4. Ben Stewart, “The Earth Is Full of Your Glory,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 43, no. 2 (April 2016): 28, <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/23/45>.