

Receiving God's Light for Earth's Energy

Carol Johnston

This homily was preached at the national conference of Presbyterians for Restoring Creation at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon in 2002. The conference title was "Earth's Energy; God's Light." Preached before the Lord's Supper, the purpose was to point to the uniqueness of the spiritually-charged materiality of the Lord's Supper and to reclaim it as the Christian practice by which Jesus Christ connects us with God, with one another, and with the rest of creation, and in which we are re-energized to participate in Christ's work of reconciling the cosmos to God.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:5)

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (II Corinthians 5:17-20)

The theme of our conference is "Earth's Energy, God's Light," an image that evokes God's creative light becoming the energy of the universe, energy that comes to us not just through the sun but through the presence of God's Spirit in every atom and every living creature, sustaining all in existence. John Calvin expressed this when he claimed that the Glory of God is visible everywhere in creation: God "shows his glory to us, whenever and wherever we cast our gaze."¹ Calvin is taking his cue from the Psalms, which are full of instances in which different parts of the creation praise God. Indeed, one of the reasons environmental devastation is so terrible is because it actually diminishes the capacity of the creation to praise and glorify God.

Tonight we come together to celebrate God's glorious, intricate creation:

- to reconnect with God's light and earth's energy,
- to open our eyes and join with the rest of creation in glorifying God,
- and to join with God in blessing the whole creation so that all life can flourish together on mother earth.

And yet—and yet, this is no easy task, for God's human children have become disconnected from God and God's creation, and we live in a world where a global economy is making global havoc, not just with millions of God's beloved creatures, but with the very cycles of life itself. It is enough to make you believe in the doctrine of Original Sin. In the midst of this downward spiral of destruction, where do we find the energy to keep working for God's creation, the energy

to keep going when the facts of global climate change, habitat destruction, species loss, and human misery all keep mounting up into a tidal wave of trouble?

One way I keep going despite the seeming futility of it all is by taking inspiration from the stories of those heroes who themselves kept going despite the odds. Many have not lived to see the difference they made, but I believe that they know in heaven. One of my favorite stories is that of Marjory Stoneman Douglas. In 1947, she published a book about the Everglades called *River of Grass*. It was the first time anyone lifted up the Everglades as a treasure rather than a nuisance. Then for the next 40-plus years she fought with the Army Corps of Engineers over their destruction of the Everglades, and she *lost* every single battle. But then, in the early 90s, the Army Corps of Engineers admitted publicly, for the first time in their history, that they had been wrong and that they had gone far in ruining the fresh water supply of all of South Florida. Since human beings cannot live without fresh water, they were going to have to spend billions of dollars to try to undo what they had done.

And Marjorie Stoneman Douglas lived to see the day! She was over a hundred years old!

So what about us? What stories can you and I share that will help people re-connect with God and with God's beloved creation, stories that will help us and others to be healed and empowered to keep going in service to God's work of redeeming the whole cosmos together? We are hearing such a story tonight in the scripture: Light has come into the world, "and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:5). John teaches us that there is . . .

- a Light that cannot be overcome,
- a Light that re-connects lost human beings with the love of God,
- a Light that heals the disconnect between human "two-leggeds" and the rest of creation and God,
- and a Light that energizes us to keep going—knowing that this work that we do, no matter how hopeless it seems to be, is God's own work, and that God will use it for good.

I hope in the next few days we will share those stories—the stories that connect and heal and energize. I know that we will learn a great deal about what is going wrong in the world, and we need to learn all that in order to learn how to correct it. But we also need to learn how to work to make a difference without burning out—how to gain the courage and the energy and the faith to hang in there for the long haul, the way Marjorie Stoneman Douglas did. We need to hear the stories of those who have made a contribution that has made a difference, and not just the stories of how frightening and terrible the world has become. We need to hear the stories of those who have discovered that working to make a difference, to care for God's creation instead of contributing to destroying it, actually brings with it a kind of energy and joy that you cannot experience any other way. These are the stories that really help, and we should be sharing them with each other. Yet there is more we can share.

You see, the assertion of John that Light has come into the world is more than just a story told; it is a story enacted in an ancient ritual practice that really does reconnect us with the rest of creation and with God. It is a ritual that is more than words, more than even symbol, and more than a hopeful ideal—though it is also all these things. In this ancient, uniquely Christian ritual, God’s light comes to us through the active cooperation of earth’s energy and the labor of human hands to bring about a spiritually-charged materiality that is creating and sustaining a transformation process that is gradually transforming us all. Does anyone know what ritual I mean?

It is the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist. I never noticed until recently what a profoundly ecological ritual the Lord’s Supper actually is. The most basic physical aspects of the Lord’s Supper reveal as much theological profundity as the most abstract symbolism. Think about it. We cannot *do* the Lord’s Supper without bread and wine. And we cannot get bread and wine without a complex culture and a functional ecosystem.

Stop there for a moment. Christians cannot do the central and distinctive ritual of Christian worship without bread and wine. That means in order to achieve the ritual that enacts on earth the reconciliation of the Messianic Banquet of Heaven, we already have to have a complex culture with enough social cohesion to produce bread, and a complex ecology healthy enough to produce wine. Now there is a new argument for saving the planet! We cannot have the Lord’s Supper without it! Up until recently, Christians have always been able to take for granted that bread and wine could be produced. But no more.

Bread and wine have been produced sustainably for centuries, yet they come from a complex series of transformations that require the cooperation of God, the sun, the earth and many creatures of the earth, including human beings. Wheat and grapevines have to be planted in the earth by human hands, but it is God and God’s creative natural processes that make them grow. Then human beings harvest them, and put together the ingredients needed, and perform the work needed to produce dough and grape juice. But then the dough and grape juice are transformed again by God and God’s creative, intricate, complicated natural processes into the miracles of bread and wine. Human beings take the bread and wine and bring them to the Lord’s table and there, with prayer and thanksgiving, God’s Spirit transforms them yet again into the Body and Blood of Christ, the instruments of Communion, of the connection of human beings with God, with one another, and with the rest of creation through Jesus Christ, in whom “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). As we receive the bread and wine, we are ourselves transformed as members of the Body of Christ, fed with spiritually transformed and spiritually charged physical food, as it were, and so re-connected and re-energized to join in the healing and transforming of the cosmos that Paul describes so eloquently in II Corinthians 5:17-20:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world [Greek: *cosmos*] to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

I want to point out another wonderful thing about the spiritually-charged physicality of the Lord's Supper: in the ritual, the bread that is basic to subsistence is made freely available to all, pointing to the importance of making sure all are fed, and even more, and delightfully, the wine that is basic to the celebration of life is also made available to all. Because of these basic physical facts, we cannot enact the ritual of the Lord's Supper without enacting in the ritual the way the world is supposed to be, was created to be, and will be one day. As Jews say, if this were all, it would be enough. But there is even more: the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine—this sacrificial gift from the creation that gives us life to share in turn with others—this is connected to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the One who trusted God wholeheartedly with his life and with his death. Through his trust in God Jesus stayed connected with God and with the rest of creation, even through his death on the cross, and reconnected us so that we can finally learn to trust God and God's creation—and be healed of our alienation from both.

In the Lord's Supper we re-member the death of Jesus on the cross—the ultimate act of trust. But we tend to forget that we also and equally re-member the resurrection—the act in which God proves worthy of trust, bringing new life out of death. So the cross and resurrection are profoundly paradigmatic and revelatory of how God's creation works:

- God uses death to bring about new life;
- God *always* uses death to bring about new life.

When we participate in the Lord's Supper we participate in God's work of making new life out of death. The more deeply we receive that new life, the more we are re-connected and healed and enabled to trust God with our own lives and with our deaths. In the Lord's Supper we re-member Jesus: not only his death, but his resurrection, and we pre-member the Messianic Banquet in Heaven—the ultimate reconciliation of the cosmos, when the whole creation is fulfilled and all of life can flourish together as God intends.

So let us receive joyfully the gifts our Savior Jesus has prepared for us, be re-connected to God and the rest of God's creation, and be re-energized for God's work of reconciling and healing the whole cosmos. Amen.

Carol Johnston is Associate Professor of Theology and Culture and Director of Lifelong Theological Education at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana. An ordained Presbyterian pastor, she lectures and publishes articles on economics and environment, Bible and nature, and the public roles of churches.

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I: v: 1, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XX, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, p. 52.