

The Choir of All Creation

Tanya Barnett

“The Choir of All Creation” —I preached this sermon one Mother’s Day to a medium-sized, urban church (Disciples of Christ). This sermon uses Psalm 148 to present the image of “creation as choir” whose unitary purpose is to praise the Creator. This sermon invites listeners to (1) consider if/when they’ve viewed creation in this way and (2) examine the role that they play within this choir (i.e., considering one’s own “ecological footprint”).

Scriptures: Psalm 148 and Romans 1:20

Happy Mother’s day to all mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers! And happy Mother’s day to all among us who are “mothers” to others in this world – although these “others” may not necessarily be our own children. This is truly a day for celebrating those who bring us life, our families, and the One who brings life to the entire family of creation.

The psalm for today comes from the planned lectionary cycle – I can’t think of a better verse for our celebration today. How appropriate that we would have such a beautiful psalm not only for Mothers Day, but also when we have this musical feast with the Medieval Women’s Choir. As with the sublime music we enjoy today, choirs of people originally sang most biblical psalms. Even many psalms that appear to have been sung by individuals were probably sung by specific families or clans. And just as we can praise God vicariously through the Women’s Choir today, the ancient Israelite singing groups, families, and clans would have served as mouthpieces for the entire community – expressing to God the community’s deep pain, fear, and joy. What I find particularly inspiring about Psalm 148 is that it seeks to radically broaden the circle of who is included in the choir or family. In every line of this psalm, the singers reach out across their parochial bounds. They exhort “kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth, young men and women alike, old and young together!” to praise the Lord – to join in this joyous family sing-along. But the invitation for other singers doesn’t stop there! The psalmists go on and on exhorting: “You heavens; you angels and hosts; you sun, moon, and shining stars; you highest heavens and waters above the heavens; hey, you sea monsters and all deeps; you fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind; you mountains and hills; you fruit trees and all cedars over there; you wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds – all of you together, join in this ecstatic chorus of praise to our Creator!” This is the image of an amazing, diverse, creation-encompassing praise chorus – a chorus, a family, that can and *should* praise God, “for God commanded and they were all created. God established them forever and ever ...” All that God creates and sustains are witnesses to God’s glory and should announce this fact. It’s not just our smaller human family that enjoys this blessed witness and the duty to bear witness.

The theologian, Terence Fretheim, in his article *Nature’s Praise of God in the Psalms*, wrote, “it is only as all creatures of God join together in the chorus of praise that the elements of the natural order or human beings witness to God as the ought.” This insight calls human beings “to

relate to the natural order in such a way that nature's praise might show forth with greater clarity." Just imagine the beautiful Women's Choir that we heard today with only sopranos who could sing within a three-note range – the tune might be intriguing, but the group would probably no longer call itself a choir. In a similar vein, Fretheim might suggest that a hymn of praise that only includes human beings – and *excludes* creeping things, sun and stars, angels, trees – would create a monochromatic musical picture, and a substantially less glorifying one for certain. St. Basil the Great's 4th Century contrition laments this sad picture:

"O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals [and all creatures] to whom thou gavest the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of humans with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to thee in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that all creatures live not for us alone but for themselves and for thee, and that they love the sweetness of life."

Again, St. Basil prayed these words in the 4th Century – how much more powerful and relevant they are today when 11% of the world's bird species, 25% of mammal species, and 34% of all fish species face immediate danger of extinction as a result of human-created habitat loss, pollution, and global warming (according to the Worldwatch Institute). And in the words of the World Wildlife Fund, "Every species loss diminishes the diversity of life on Earth with untold consequences for the web of life. Yet, at present rates of extinction, as much as a third of the world's [plant and animal] species could be gone in the next 20 years." And the most fragile part of this web of life surely includes the poor of the earth: those people whose well-being is most immediately and directly connected to the well-being of creation. This is the heart-breaking news: we are, knowingly and unknowingly, muting the "voice of the earth," which indeed should go up to our God in song, rather than in a groan of travail.

With such losses, not only does God miss out on the opportunity to be glorified by all of creation, but we would also miss out on hearing the unique expressions of what God is doing throughout creation. Romans 1:20 reads, "Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made." Where have you witnessed God's eternal power and divine nature? Our God is a God who became flesh, a God who is present throughout creation – not only a transcendent heavenly host. I love this quote from the 15th Century reformer, Martin Luther: "Do you think God is sleeping on a pillow in heaven? ... God is wholly present in all creation, in every corner, behind and before you." Luther also wrote, "God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars." We shouldn't miss the opportunity to hear the Gospel in its entirety.

In a moment, we'll go back to our choir – one that might be called "The Hymn of All Creation, Family Singers." For a moment, I do want to again ponder this question: where have you witnessed God's eternal power and divine nature? In my life, the place where I so clearly witnessed God at work in the world was in one of the most unlikely places: on the fringes of the Sahara Desert in Niger, West Africa where I lived as a Peace Corps volunteer for two years. When many people think of the desert, words like "lifeless," "barren," and maybe even "God-

forsaken” come to mind. Truly, there were days in this 125°, tree-less, rain-less land when these words entered my mind. When I saw the friends’ children and friends themselves dying from common illnesses, I’m sure that these words entered my mind. The web of life in this place was indeed extremely fragile – and this web so clearly connected sun with rain with land with animals with plants with people... and more. There was no asphalt or air conditioned buildings to separate the people in my village from the rest of creation – truly they knew that all life was bound up together and that, along with Job, they might suggest: “ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you ... who among all these does not know that ... in the Lord’s hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.” Perhaps you may be wondering where, in this environment, one might witness God’s eternal power and divine nature. And my response is: In the flowers, grasses, and crops that miraculously emerged out of the sand with less than four days of rain a year. In the blessed coolness of the night that brought a reprieve from the sun scorched days. In the shepherd-like tending and keeping that my village friends practiced on their fields and in the care of their animals – they cared even to the point of sharing their small, grass homes with young animals. I witnessed God’s equality-demanding power and compassionate nature in the times that my friends shared scarce amounts of food with each other, and with me, in such an abundant manner. And so, I glimpsed the family of God in a way that I have never seen before: I saw a family that surpassed the bounds of small nuclear families, and even surpassed the bounds of the human family. I glimpsed God’s family of creation – a very fragile example of this family, but one that bore no false illusion that one part of the body could do without another part.

Now let us return to the image of the choir that sings the hymn of all creation. Perhaps it is difficult to hear this hymn in its fullness today – with so much environmental destruction, our separation from the rest of creation, and our fast-paced and distracted lives. Many great people in our Christian tradition have also lived in parallel, affluent times in which huge gulfs laid between the rich and the poor, and between humans and the rest of creation. Some of you may be familiar with St. Francis of Assisi. Francis was born in the 12th Century, the son of a wealthy merchant family in Italy. In his youth, he was known for his extravagant, bawdy, consumptive lifestyle. But as he entered his 20s he began to hear callings from God that would change his life. The callings came as he witnessed true poverty and disease and when, in a time of prayer, he heard a voice say, “Go, Francis, and repair my house, which as you see is falling into ruin.” Francis took this message very literally at first and gave up all he had (including some of his father’s possessions) to repair local churches that lay in ruins. He wed himself to “Lady Poverty” in order to remain focused on his ministry to God’s house here on earth – to not be distracted by his former acquisitive pursuits. He soon realized that God’s house, was actually God’s household — the “whole inhabited earth” (*oikoumene*) as described in New Testament. (As a side note, we use this Greek root word *oikos*, or “eco,” to form words like ecology, economics, and ecumenical). Francis saw that this household consisted not only dilapidated church buildings, but it also included the poor, the creatures of the earth, the afflicted, everyone and everything. God’s household included all of creation, and the most vulnerable parts of creation especially revealed, to Francis, the vulnerable and beautiful face of Christ. Francis truly owned nothing, but in emptying himself, he realized that he shared a home with the moon, sun, stars, water, fire, flowers, children, elders, birds, and even death. Again, as Job believed, this home rested in the hollow of God’s hand. And to all who shared this home, Francis called brother and sister – not stranger, but family – and he was known for compromising his own comforts to protect and

provide for his family members. In Francis' opinion, first among the responsibilities of all family members (including himself) was to praise the Source and Sustainer. His biographer Thomas of Celano wrote,

When Francis would come on a vast field of flowers, he would preach to them and exhort them to praise God as if they could understand his words. He would likewise exhort cornfields, vineyards, stones, fields, springs of water, green plants in gardens, earth, fire, and water to a praise and love for the Creator. In short, he called all creatures by the name of brother and sister and, in a manner that few can understand, he saw the simple things of creation with the eye of one whose heart had already attained to the blessed liberty of the children of God [in the words of Romans 8].

On this Mothers Day, this day of celebrating Mother Earth and all that God sustains, I leave you with a few stanzas of Francis' version of Psalm 148 – may we join our hearts in this hymn of all creation:

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,

Especially Sir Brother Sun, who is the day through whom You give us light. And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor. Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars. In the heavens You have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You my Lord through our Sister, Mother Earth! Who sustains and governs us, producing varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs!

Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks to the Lord, and serve the Lord with great humility. Amen.

Tanya Marcovna Barnett serves as a Program Director with Earth Ministry. Her work includes preaching and teaching, coordinating the Colleague Support Program (for congregational organizers), and programs related to food security and environmental justice. She edited Earth Ministry's *Greening Congregations Handbook*. As part of her earliest, eco-justice "education," she worked with both a plant genetics corporation and migrant and urban farmer workers. She earned her B.A. with dual majors in Theology and Biology from Valparaiso University in Indiana. She served as an agroforestry extension volunteer with the Peace Corps in Niger, West Africa. Tanya earned her Master's of Divinity from Vanderbilt Divinity School in Tennessee where she focused on ecological theology and ethics, and pastoral care. She currently sits on the boards of Washington Toxics Coalition and the Washington Sustainable Food and Farming Network. Tanya and her husband live in Lake City (Seattle) where, in 2002, they worked with local churches, businesses, and community groups to open a farmers market.