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“Created to Praise” GPPC 4-24-16, Sunday after Earth Day
John 13:31-35, Psalm 148

The alarm on my Fitbit goes off, buzzing on my wrist to awaken me. I roll out of bed and the sun’s just coming up behind the window blinds. By the time I have my clothes on, Zoe, our eighty-pound shelter mutt has also risen from her mat on the floor at the foot of the bed. She shakes, yawns, licks her lips, and stretches by leaning and walking forward and dragging her back legs behind her. Then she does a little yoga—downward facing dog. And then she starts to whine, something she does a lot. I let her outside for just a minute before she dashes back in, whining again, and I give her her food and water.

I walk to the laundry room, open the door, and Shelley greets me by rubbing against my leg and saying, “Meow.” I give her food and then go give Zoe, who has started whining again, a dog biscuit.

The coffee’s already made. So I pour a cup and have a sip before walking out to get the newspaper at the end of the drive. As Zoe and I step outside onto the back deck I hear and see singing cardinals, bluebirds, sparrows, goldfinches, and robins. Some sit in the trees. Some

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perch on the feeders. Some rest below the feeders and peck at what falls there. Some fly around chasing each other, a little bird romance in the air. Sometimes an owl hoots in the distance. Other times a crow caws. One morning I look toward the creek and see two deer sneaking down for a drink and a wild turkey strutting across the back yard at the same time. On another morning, I spy a king snake trapped in the plastic netting that keeps the birds out of the strawberries. The more he's tried to slither through, the more the mesh has dug into his cool, smooth flesh and I'm saddened to realize he must have been stuck there for hours. I pick him up, marveling at his strength, and I spend about a half an hour trying to cut away the accidental trap before I release him in the woods with a silent prayer that he's okay.

But on this morning, I simply walk down the drive for the paper. Leaves are sprouting on the trees. Dandelions and buttercups speckle the yard with bright yellow. Flowers bloom in the planting areas and even in the half-light they are beautiful. The hummingbirds have returned from their annual trip to Central America and they zoom around sounding like light sabers from the Star Wars movies. The sky is clear with touches of

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clouds. In the bushes near the road I hear something rustling around. A bird? A critter? Who knows?

But this we do know; it all sings praise to God. “Praise the Lord!” sings the Psalmist. The Hebrew is pronounced hallelujah. And it means to be boastful, to praise. Hey, we’re allowed to brag, even *told* to brag, not about ourselves but about God. And we aren’t the only ones doing the bragging and praising. Just listen to the Psalmist again.

“Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.”

The Psalmist is painting a colossal picture of the universe for us. He starts at the top and works his way down. We catch a glimpse of the abode of heaven with God’s angels and God’s host (God’s army of angels) praising God with a choir. Do they sing in four-part harmony?

Also high up are the sun, the moon, and the shining stars. If you were a person who lived in antiquity, how might you have reacted to the sun, the moon, and the shining stars? They were even called “celestial

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beings,” right? You might have worshiped these celestial beings as did some religions of the time. Heck, we still have some “sun worshipers” today, don’t we? But the Psalmist says the sun, the moon, and the shining stars praise God. They worship God, because God commanded and they were created. God spoke a word and they came into being.

Back in 1999, author Annie Dillard said the information gleaned from the Hubble space telescope had improved our data about the universe. She wrote, “There are maybe nine galaxies for each of us—eighty billion galaxies. Each galaxy harbors at least one hundred billion suns. In our galaxy, the Milky Way, there are four hundred billion suns—give or take 50 percent—or sixty-nine suns for each person alive. The Hubble shows, said an early report, that the stars are ‘not 12 but 13 billion years old.’ Two galaxies, nine galaxies...one hundred billion suns, four hundred billion suns...twelve billion years, thirteen billion years... These astronomers are nickel-and-diming us to death.” (Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 72-73.)

And I’ll bet with all that we know now, those numbers have increased. Praise the Lord, sun, and moon, and shining stars!

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Then the Psalmist shifts his gaze lower by painting an impressive and strangely varied list. He sings, “Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!”

A Bible scholar asks, “If human dance can express praise, why not the dance of the loons on a Minnesota lake? If the sound of a trumpet can express praise, why not the sound of a trumpeter swan?” (James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion Series, 501.)

But what are the sea monsters the Psalmist talks about? We don’t know. It may be that the sea monster personifies the primeval chaos. But God tames the chaos. And there is another way of thinking about the sea monster too.

Many years ago, Tony Campolo, Baptist preacher and professor spoke in Lancaster, Pennsylvania by invitation of our presbytery’s Peacemaking Committee. During his speech he reminded us that scientists have been able to record the sounds Blue Whales make under water. These mammals are the largest animals in the world and possibly

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the largest animals that ever lived. Have you ever heard recordings of Blue Whales? Amazing, aren't they? Blue Whales actually sing. And, as Campolo reminded us, if we wipe out all the whales, as we've done with too many other species, then there is one fewer creature to sing praise to God. One fewer creature to offer creation's praise.

But the Psalmist's picture is even wider and the command even deeper, isn't it? Fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind, mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals, all cattle, creeping things, flying birds. What's he saying? He is proclaiming that *the entire ecosystem sings praise to God!* Not just a few well-informed people. Not just the domesticated creatures and cultivated plants. Not only beautiful houses of worship. No. The entire ecosystem sings praise to God. And that has implications for the last subject the Psalmist flicks his brush to paint—us. Kings (and queens), princes and rulers, young and old, all people. As theologian Jürgen Moltmann puts it, "...Human civilization has to be integrated into the ecosystem of the earth, not, conversely, that the earth must be subjugated to the human system of domination." (Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!: God's Future for Humanity and the Earth*, 34.)

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We're called to join in the universe's praise of God by our stewardship of the ecosystem.

So to be a Christian, a follower of Christ, is always to be an environmentalist as well. And as Christians we will always be thinking not merely about short-term profits but about long-term sustainability. Long-term praise of the Creator and Owner of all that is and who has entrusted creation to our temporary care.

Oil wells off the coast of North Carolina might bring short-term profit, but they risk long-term ecological disaster. Just ask Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida about the BP disaster.

Fracking for natural gas in North Carolina might bring short-term profit, but it also risks long-term catastrophe. Just ask people in other states where the water has been ruined and earthquakes have increased.

We may deny the overwhelming scientific evidence of humanity's contribution to climate change. And we may do nothing to avert the coming calamity. Then our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren will suffer. Our coastal cities will be destroyed, as they are already being destroyed in developing nations. New diseases are

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already being born and animal species are dying. Right now, for example, the bats are dying from white nose fungus. Bats eat literally tons of mosquitoes. And mosquitoes are the deadliest creatures on the planet. So we like bats. We want more bats, don't we?

Scientists say it's too late to stop climate change completely. But we can do the little things. Recycle. Adjust the thermostat. Buy local. And we have the opportunity now to shift to cleaner, renewable forms of energy to make the climate change less severe. Of course, some people ask, "What if we switch to cleaner, renewable energy, but climate change ends up having nothing to do with humanity's choices? What then?" Then we still will have made the ecosystem cleaner and safer, and we will have made ourselves less dependent on oil that often comes from countries with terrible human rights abuses.

To be a Christian, is also to be an environmentalist, because the world does not belong to us. As the old hymn goes, "This is my Father's World." The world belongs to God. And we are beckoned, invited, even *commanded* to join the ecosystem and all the universe in praising God with everything we have.

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The first step in praise is to notice what we are grateful for. So this week, starting today, starting right now, let's pay closer attention to the universe around us. Take in the people and faces around us with their variety and glory shaped by time and experience and the very hand of God. Listen with open ears to the sounds of people singing, a baby's laughter or cries. Note the feel of a handshake or a hug. Step outside and feel the wind blow, hear its whisper. Take off your shoes, if you dare, and feel the grass underfoot. Pick a wildflower. Pet a dog. Listen to the birds. Look at the moon. Try to count the stars. While we're at it, count our blessings. Praise the Lord.

And do what we can to take care of it all.

Writer, farmer, and Christian environmentalist Wendell Berry tells about going to a hearing around 1966 in Frankfort, Kentucky. A coal company was damaging and destroying land owned by homeowners and farmers by using "contour stripping." There were about fifteen landowners in attendance in protest. Berry noticed another man present with them. He looked different, well-dressed in a suit and tie. During a break in the hearing Berry spoke with the man. Berry writes, "I asked if

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he owned land that was affected by strip mining. He said no, he had no land at risk. He was a lawyer. ‘Oh,’ I said. ‘You’re here to represent these people.’ Again he said no. He represented only himself. I said, ‘Well, then, why are you here?’ And he replied: ‘I want to be on the side of the right.’” Berry says, “I have never forgotten him, for he gave me the one reason that will always be enough.” (Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection*, 108-109.)

Let all creation, all the ecosystem praise the Lord, and let us join the chorus in gratitude and faithful stewardship. Because that will always be the side of the right. In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal