



90 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
Tel: (860) 521-9460 Fax: (860) 521 1855

Senior Minister: Rev. Thomas G. Carr
Associate Minister: Amy Hollis
Choral Director: Mindy Shilansky
Accompanist: Mr. Bruce M. Hector

Psalm 148

Widen the Circle

FBC, West Hartford

April 20, 2008

Psalm 148 is one of my favorites. Poetically, it is extremely expansive and, image-wise, it is one of those that has the power to take us out of our narrow selves to see something so much bigger, broader and all-encompassing. I think it is significant that we've read this psalm on the Sunday before the world celebrates Earth Day, and how appropriate that we would have such a praise-filled psalm to echo the music of the Chancel Choir who just sang one of my favorite anthems, "How Can I Keep From Singing?"

Psalms are songs, originally meant to be sung and most biblical psalms, you may know, were originally sung by the choir or the whole congregation of gathered worshippers would sing responsively with a cantor. Those psalms that appear to be the work of individuals, according to most biblical scholars, were probably sung by families or small clans. Like our choir, these groups served as the mouthpiece for the entire community, expressing to God all the joys and fears, the pain and struggles and triumphs of the people.

What is especially interesting to me about Psalm 148 is how the poet/songwriter seeks to radically widen the circle of who is included in the choir. In every line, the singers reach out across and beyond the bounds of the choir - or the family or the clan, whatever may be the smaller group:

"Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and women alike,
old and young together!

Let them praise the name of
the Lord,"

(verses 11-13)

Which is great, isn't it? To expand the circle of people to praise God is a great thing. But did you notice that the invitations for other singers to join the chorus, doesn't stop there?

“You heavens, you angels,
you host of the Most High!
Sun and moon, . . . shining stars!
Waters from the heavens;
sea monsters; fire and hail,
snow and frost, wind and mountains,
hills and fruit trees;
wild animals and cattle,
creepy things and flying birds!”

Everything - everything! – is called to join in the song to praise the one Creator and Sustainer of all life.

Pretty amazing, isn't it? What we have here is an image of this amazing, diverse creation - all creatures, great and small – forming a choir to praise God:

“Let them praise the name of

the Lord,
for he commanded and they
were created.”

All creatures are witnesses to God's work in the world.

Now, I am well aware that there are those who call this “mere poetry,” nice but not “really real.” And, of course, if your way of looking at life is one that sees that other-than-human creatures only sing or call or squawk or howl when they're looking for a mate or to attract food, and that apart from us and our use of the rest of life, other living beings have no value, then, yes, this is “mere poetry.” But to those who know the profound nature of poetry, what is supposedly “mere” is truth that runs broader and deeper than anything we can rationally argue away.

Have you ever heard a humpback whale sing? Only a mating call? How about a wolf howling or elephants trumpeting or cicadas at night? Or dozens of species of birds and crickets or the sound of the wind through the leaves? Or even the song of silence as flowering trees bloom and daffodils and forsythia burst forth? Listen.

[Play the sounds of some of the above]

All creatures have a unique language. None of them are like the human languages – theirs cannot do what the human symbolism can do. But they do have their unique ways of communicating, of singing. And surely their songs are heard by the One who made them all, whether we know what they're saying or not. Theologian Terence Fretheim wrote: "It is only as all creatures of God join together in the chorus of praise that the elements of the natural order along with human beings, witness to God as they ought."

Have you ever considered the second line of the Doxology that we sing every week in worship? I had it printed in the worship bulletin so you could see with your eyes what we know so deeply that we often forget. Here's the second line: "Praise God, all creatures, here below." **All** creatures. There's a modern translation of the Doxology on page 591 of our hymnal, and it tries to be inclusive in language, and I applaud that. But, in doing so, the text totally misses the point and intent of the song. It sings: "Praise Christ, all people, here below." Do you see the difference? The good intention of the writer trying to expand the circle has shrunk it. "Praise God, **all** creatures!"

Think about our choir for a moment: imagine the choir with only sopranos! Now, I like sopranos, but wouldn't you agree with me that the songs, after a while, would get pretty dull without the amazing blend of all different types of voices and notes sung and harmonies produced.? How would Earth's creature choir sound if the hymn of praise only included human beings, and excluded everything else? In the fourth century, church Father Saint Basil the Great prays a prayer of lament over the silence of the voices of creation:

"O God, enlarge within us a sense of fellowship with all living beings, our brothers the animals 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 You in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that all creatures live not for us alone but for themselves and for You, and that they love the sweetness of life."

Remember: that prayer was offered in the 4th century. Earth Day right around the corner can cause us to reflect on Saint Basil's prayer and what's happening to so much of the planet: how we are bringing to extinction 20 to 40,000 species of life each year, how habitat destruction, the effects of global warming, deforestation, the strip mining of the oceans, the rapid loss of topsoil and the assault of chemicals poured out into the biosphere, are bringing to an end a geological era that began with the end of the dinosaurs, 65 million years ago. And, of course, this devastation of the fragile web of life includes the poorest human beings. But not only the poor; we are all effected because of our intricate connection with all existence. From a depth perspective with the eyes of the Spirit, we are making the world a place where the voice of praise is being muffled.

Do you know something else? Because this is happening, primarily at our hands, not only are we missing out of hearing and participating in the creation chorus of praise, but we are becoming deaf to what God is doing. "Ever since the creation of the

world,” Paul writes at the beginning of Romans, “God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.” (Romans 1: 20) And, in another place, in Colossians, the Apostle writes: “. . . in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, . . . all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (1: 16-17). The Protestant reformer of the 16th century, John Calvin wrote, “The world is the theatre of God’s glory.... The creation is quite like a spacious and splendid house, provided and filled with the most exquisite and the most abundant furnishings. Everything in it tells us of God.”

O, my! If we continue to extinguish life, what will we miss? What will we not see, not know, of what God is doing, of the gifts God is offering, of the abundant life Christ promises?

Reflect for just a moment: when, where and how, have you experienced your deepest sense of awe and wonder, and/or witnessed God’s presence, God’s grace, most fully? ----- I’ve raised this question dozens of times in small groups over the years and do you know something? Almost all the responses – not all, but most – were not that people felt the presence of God in say, a shopping mall, office building, in front of the television set, or even in a church. I wish we did have such experiences in those places and in those moments. I know God is everywhere always touching us. The overwhelming responses to those questions have been somewhere in what we call “nature”: in a garden, a walk in the woods, standing by the ocean, in the mountains, gazing at a flower, listening to the song of the birds, feeling the wind on one’s face. If you’ve ever shared in a group like this, have you noticed that when people speak of these special places or moments, their faces radiate, their eyes light up or there’s a far away look, and an energy comes out of them that is palpable. Do you know what I’m talking about?

Wednesday afternoon, I saw an eagle. It was, to me, very strange, very unexpected and powerful. I was driving back from a visit to Avery Heights in Hartford, coming down New Britain Avenue, not too far from Pep Boys. I was stopped at a light and just as the light turned green, I looked up and to my right and noticed a large black/brown bird flying over a tree just to the side of the road. He was about 25 feet in the air and, at first, I couldn’t believe my eyes, until he tilted slightly to the west and south, and I saw the white head and yellow/orange beak and the bird was svelt, an adult. The wing span had to be 5 feet or so, and I was stunned. Not only was I stunned that this wasn’t somewhere out where there were more trees and water and that it was in the middle of the city of Hartford, but that I had been gifted to actually see this incredible sight. It was a gift, one that has been moving inside of me, since. Something of the Sacred was revealed to me that day, something of God in the chorus of life.

This is why it’s so essential that we save wild places. Yes, because life needs everything these eco-systems or bio-regions give of their biology and chemistry and all the processes of life they support. But on a deeper level, life - Earth - is a vessel of the Sacred, just like you and I are, the place of God’s presence, and is the foundation, the framework for our conscious spiritual reflection and connection with God. If we lived on the moon, as I heard a theologian put it recently, our images of God and ourselves and

the spiritual dimension of existence, would be vastly different. But we emerged from this incredibly beautiful planet and are kin to every living being on it, and therefore, we not only know God through revelations we find within what we call nature, but nature itself sings the praise of God.

So, shall we widen the circle of the community? Can we include what God chooses to include?

One final thought and with it, I return to the creation choir. It's hard to hear this chorus today with the vast destruction of Earth's life systems and our view of life that sees us as separate from every other living being. But the song is still being sung; it's been going on for 4 billion years of Earth's life. Our purpose is to take down the barriers that we've erected that are muffling the songs of life and facilitate praise to God. We've had our singers through the millennia. One of them is Saint Francis, who, to some, is the patron saint of nature. He was also deeply connected to the poor and their plight and realized that God's household included all of God's creatures, everyone, especially, the weak and the poor who revealed to him the vulnerable and beautiful face of Christ. By emptying himself of all that he had, he realized that he shared a home with all. And Francis knew, that his true purpose was to praise God, the Source of all of this goodness. His earliest biographer wrote the following about him:

“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.”

And here we are, in a moment in Earth and human history, when it is so crucial to remember that our praise should be rendered to God. And not only our praise, but that of every living being. Listen, if you will, to Saint Francis' rendition of Psalm 148:

Canticle of the Brother Sun

Saint Francis of Assisi

Most high, omnipotent, good Lord.
To you alone belong praise and glory,
Honor and blessing.
No one is worthy to breathe your name.
Be praised, my Lord, for all your creatures.

In the first place, for the blessed Brother Sun
Who gives us the day and enlightens us through you.

He is beautiful and radiant with his great splendor
Giving witness of you, most Omnipotent One.

Be praised my Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars
Formed by you so bright, precious and beautiful.

Be praised my Lord, for Brother Wind
And for the airy skies, so cloudy and serene;
For every weather, be praised, for it is life-giving.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water
So necessary yet so humble, precious and chaste.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire,
Who lights up the night.
He is beautiful and carefree, robust and fierce.

Be praised, my Lord, for our sister, Mother Earth,
Who nourishes and watches us
While bringing forth abundant fruits
with colored flowers and herbs.

Praise and bless the Lord.
Render him thanks
Serve him with great humility. Amen.