All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir

Psalm 148:1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! 148:2 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! 148:3 Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! 148:4 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! 148:5 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. 148:6 He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. 148:7 Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, 148:8 fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! 148:9 Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! 148:10 Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! 148:11 Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! 148:12 Young men and women alike, old and young together! 148:13 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. 148:14 He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

Romans 8:18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 8:19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 8:20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 8:21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Most of you probably have no knowledge of the musical sophistication I have always tried to bring to ministry. For example, I once confessed to an affinity for country music as I preached a sermon on how Reformed Christians have emphasized the importance of the Ten Commandments as guidance for an ethical life. That one I named, in clear tribute to Kenny Rogers, The Long Arm of the Law. The title of today’s sermon reaches even more deeply into the memory bank and pulls out the title of Bill Staine’s classic folk tune, All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir. It concludes this way:
It’s a simple song of livin’ sung everywhere
By the ox and the fox and the grizzly bear
Grumpy alligator and the hawks above
Sly raccoon and the turtle dove.

All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws
Or anything they got.

(Were you afraid I might try to sing it?) These lyrics capture at least a portion of what is spoken of in Psalm 148. And, of course, in doing so they stand squarely in a long line of songs inspired—directly or indirectly—by this Psalm. Think for example of hymns like “Praise, My Soul the God of Heaven,” “Let the Whole Creation Cry,” “I Sing the Mighty Power of God” with which we began our worship this morning, and of course the classic one written by Francis of Assisi—“All Creatures of Our God and King.”

Whether in the folk music of a Bill Staines, or in the stately text of a Francis of Assisi, this music is a profound summons to us to come to terms with something absolutely essential for our Christian living—today and into the indefinite future. It reels us back into the world of the 148th Psalm and invites us to understand afresh something basic about our lives in our 21st century world.

The central claims of Psalm 148 are both cosmological and anthropological. They have to do with the universe as a whole and with human beings within it. The universal claim is that all creation is summoned to the common task of giving praise to the God who is its initial source
and its final resource for—being. The first six verses focus on the outer reaches of the cosmos—the heavens, the heights, those upper reaches of the universe with their animate and inanimate denizens (angels, sun, moon and shining stars). Almost as if the psalmist has not stretched far enough into those upper reaches, the psalm appeals again to the “highest heavens” and to the “waters above the heavens.” In the Hebrew way of thinking, this amounts to an exhaustive reference to “all that is out there.”

The reason that praise of God is demanded of the highest and outermost reaches of creation is because these have been uttered into being by God’s own command and they have been founded and bounded by God’s own act. As vast as “all that is out there” may be, God is vaster still. Small wonder that St. Anselm, a theologian of the 11th century, came in prayerful appreciation to understand God as that than which nothing greater can be imagined. So when this soaring majesty of the universe confronts the yet more soaring majesty of its source, praise is the only fitting response.

The roll call turns from heaven to terra firma in verses 7 through 13, bringing things down to earth, as it were. Here too all the elements of earthly locale, both fanciful and ordinary, are summoned to praise. The unruly, natural forces of the world (sea monsters, deeps, fire, hail, snow, frost and stormy wind) are also depicted as obedient to the God whose command they fulfill in being what they are. Moreover, the landscape itself is captured in the summons (mountains and hills), along with the flora it nurtures (fruit trees and cedars). And finally the psalmist includes the parts of creation which we, perhaps mistakenly, think are alone in the ability to sense the world around them. The psalmist summons animals, domesticated and otherwise, to the chorus of praise (wild animals, cattle, creeping and flying creatures).
This is of course the part of the psalm that Bill Staines incorporates into *All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir*. As we said at the outset, it captures in delightful verse some of these last named members of creation that are summoned to praise.

It's a simple song of livin' sung everywhere  
By the ox and the fox and the grizzly bear  
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Some sing low, some sing higher  
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Or anything they got.

And after these nonhuman animals are comprehensively named, the Psalmist moves on to the full range of humankind, embracing in the call both the elite—kings, princes, rulers—and the ordinary—young and old, men and women. Together with those earlier mentioned “outer reaches” of the cosmos, these “inner reaches” are summoned into the universal combined choir that acknowledges the glory of that One above earth and heaven, than which nothing greater can be imagined, and in whom is found the origin and destiny of all creatures, great and small.

Thus the overarching, universal claim of Psalm 148 is that the proper purpose of all that exists—known and unknown, seen and unseen—is to give adoration and praise to God. So the language of praise is in the words of Patrick Miller “the speech that is truly primal and universal. All existence is capable of praising God and does so. In such speaking God is identified.”\(^1\) In this way creation itself is witness to the reality of God as Creator. And that is precisely the universal
claim of Psalm 148—all nature acknowledges the Maker of Heaven and Earth in its chorus of praise.

II

We come closer to the “orienting” significance of this psalm for our lives in the 21st century when we turn to its claim about humanity. Karl Barth has suggested that this psalm impresses a deep humility on humankind. “As we must say of [human beings] that [they are] what [they are] only in gratitude towards God, we shall have to say the same of all other creatures.” So the first point of the psalm’s anthropology is not that humanity is distinguished and different from the rest of creation, but that humankind is united to all the rest. As the repeated refrain of the psalm makes clear, that unity is found in the wonder of praise to God. As James Mays has put it, “We human beings are one with all being in our relation to One whose name alone is exalted and whose majesty is above earth and heaven.”

Our kinship with all of creation is complete in the act of giving praise to God.

Yet the theological anthropology of Psalm 148 has another dimension. Notwithstanding the unity of humanity with the rest of creation in the chorus of praise, humanity has a special vocation within this shared, common vocation. Just because we can voice the praise native to all creation, we humans have a unique responsibility not only to call upon the rest of creation for praise, but to attend to the well being of the rest of creation so that it survives and endures.
to give praise. And as we are learning all too well, whether creation will survive and endure for such praise is an open question.

The most chilling vision I know that depicts a created order without vitality sufficient for such praise is Cormac McCarthy’s novel, The Road. As an account of a father and son trying to survive in a world that has suffered an undefined apocalyptic collapse, it depicts a world without any of the delight found in Psalm 148. The story gives us frightful descriptions of human community that has broken down under the weight of societal collapse. But equally chilling are its descriptions of a natural order that renders no praise, but only a relentless, sluggish, gray, wet, cold, oppressive, death-threatening presence. It portrays a landscape with only fleeting glimpses of life, all passing inexorably toward death, rendering no praise. And if we are too readily inclined to dismiss this as fear-mongering fiction, we might want to listen to the testimony of Denise Giardina, novelist and Episcopal priest. She speaks with simple eloquence about the spiritual devastation wrought in Appalachia by mountaintop removal—a mining procedure that forgoes tunneling into the earth and instead simply breaks majestic mountains into rubble in order to more easily extract the coal—a procedure that has become the preferred way to satisfy our insatiable demands for energy.

Where once magnificent vistas of mountains existed that have inspired poetry, prose, and song, there now remain flattened plains, occluded streams, polluted waters, and barren fields that cannot support the life that previously called it home. And in deepest irony, the coal thus produced when converted to electricity is likely a prime contributor to long term climate change that tends toward the kind of “collapse” that Jared Diamond has chronicled in a book of
that same name. Multiply that kind of disregard of the earth’s vocation to give praise to God
over the face of globe, and Cormac McCarthy’s eerie vision seems much too close for comfort.

Put simply, the theological anthropology of Psalm 148 is finally a theological ethic that
requires the human family—and certainly the Christian family on behalf of the human family—
to give priority to the care of creation as a fundamental part of its core belief—that humanity’s
chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Knowing that this chief end is shared with all
creation means that we have a fundamental responsibility to support and nurture the highest
beings of heaven and the lowest creatures of earth (from mountain tops to snail darters) so
that their voices continue unabated in the universal, combined chorus of praise.

Conclusion

But what in the world can we do about any of this? The greatest threat to our meeting
the challenge that Psalm 148 lays before us comes from the fear that what we do will not make
a real difference. After all we are not by and large in positions of authority, able to issue orders
and expect results to follow. But, friends, we are the people of a God who in the resurrection of
Jesus has given the first fruit of what is promised, not just for humans, but for all creation. In his
letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul voiced a scope to salvation that encompasses all of
creation when he said it is not only the human family but “the creation itself [that] will be set
free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”
[Rom. 8:21]

Here on the sixth Sunday of Easter, the theme of resurrection is as crucial as it was on
Easter day. For in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus we discover the resource that will
enable us to summon the universal choir to its proper praise. Jesus’ resurrection is the
enactment by God of something beyond all human and creaturely possibilities, the
establishment of a new creation just where the old creation has come to its inevitable end.

Psalm 148 does not speak of a tree-hugging, animal rights political correctness. But it
does speak of a theological vision that may move us to hug trees and many other creatures and
features in this splendid, praise-rendering world that God has made. So let Psalm 148 awaken
us to the deeper meaning of folk songs and great hymns of worship. It is more than good music
for tapping our toes or marching in and out of worship. It is music that recalls us to a special
vocation for the human family in tending the creation that God makes and summons in its
entirety to joyful, continuous, even raucous, praise. Let us not mistake care for the creation as
incidental to the life of faith, but rather let us regard it as belonging to the fabric of faith itself.
And let us look for ways in our common life that may help us live into the challenge. Then we
will begin to grasp—and begin to be grasped by—the claims of this psalm on us and on the
world. Then we will begin to embrace our unique vocation to sustain the ability of the whole
creation to “Praise the Lord!” All God’s critters got a place in the choir!

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3 James Luther Mays, Psalms: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, John